



Distance Learning Enrolment and Retention Strategies in the Digital Age:

Case Study of a Nigerian University

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Abstract

Distance Learning (DL) in the digital age was established to cater for busy students who are mostly working class as a remote learning programmes. The effectiveness of DL programmes is measured by how much of its accessibility online. This study was set out to examine the Distance Learning enrolment, the percentage of students who continue and those who complete their academic courses. The University of Ibadan, Nigeria was used as a case study while the study established the criteria for admission into the DL programme, the busy working class learners fitting into DL programmes, the level of feedback the DL programme learners can get online, the learners level of accessibility to the DL programmes online in terms of application, classes/lectures and examination in respect to the expected view on these accessibilities in the digital age. It was concluded that the working class busy learners should be given more priority to update their knowledge, skills and allow for flexible schedules through DL programmes, while the study recommended that the DL programme be tailored to suit the working class busy learners and not the younger/less busy ones who should have embraced the regular schooling system.

Keywords

Open and Distance Learning, Digitalisation, Retention Strategies, Online Education, University of Ibadan

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, distance learning focuses more on how well a school or centre ensures academic success and completion with little or no physical contact to the institution, the ability to access the school online, submit applications, complete registration, attend classes, and even take exams online. One of the key benchmarks for evaluating the effectiveness of distant learning programmes is ease of accessible online (Arhin, 2018). Internal student retention initiatives are beneficial for enhancing programmes, curricula, and academic support. Administrators of higher education in Nigeria frequently focus on students' academic and social integration into the campus community without giving much thought to the time-constrained and busy students from the working class. The department of adult education had earlier recognised this threat at the University of Ibadan and developed the concept of a remote learning programme to serve this group of busy working-class students who urgently needed to address their educational deficiencies.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The researcher observed that many students now gained admission into the distance learning part-time programmes mainly because it seems easier as it does not require Joint Admission and Matriculation Board examination (JAMB), a unified required examination before admission into any higher institution in Nigeria. Many of such candidates are not gainfully employed nor possessing such qualities to which distance learning Part time programmes were set to accommodate, thus finding it difficult to cope with the flexibility of the distance learning part-time programme leading to such candidates making unnecessary demands some of which had been granted to the detriment of the mature working class learners whom the programme was originally meant for. There is a dire need to do an assessment of predictors of distance learning students participation and retention in the digital world so as to make workable recommendations to ensure that the programme stay focused on the ideology of an ideal DLC programme and not just duplicating the efforts of the regular traditional university system/programme.

LITERATURE REVIEW

University of Ibadan (UI) Distance Learning Centre

In 1972, the Department of Adult Education at the University of Ibadan came up with the concept of distance learning. In 1976, the proposal for the launch of the various programmes was made to the university's senate. Later, the National Universities Commission also agreed to support the programme as long as it was self-financing. Thus, the current distance learning programme began as an external degree programme before changing to an external studies programme of the department of adult education in 1988. This programme now includes courses from the parent department of adult education as well as two other departments, guidance and counselling and teacher education. By 1993, four additional departments had joined the original three to offer courses leading to the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree, including Special Education, Library Science, Educational Management, and Physical and Health Education. The curriculum was expanded to include the Faculty of Agriculture in 1998. In order to keep pace with global developments, the name of the centre was changed from Centre for External Studies to Distance Learning Centre in 2002.

The University of Ibadan (UI) Distance Learning Programme

The course of study offered by the University of Ibadan's full-time students is the same as that of the distance learning centre. The only distinction is that it is primarily intended for members of the working class, whose schedules, locations, means of support, and other circumstances might prevent them from pursuing full-time studies at a university. These learners read their study materials whenever it is convenient for them, occasionally connect with their tutors, and were meant to spend six weeks a year in residence for revision and exams.

Nigerian universities are starting to adopt the distance learning or distance education model, which is steadily gaining ground in the country. Although a number of Nigerian universities provide distance learning possibilities, the University of Ibadan's programme is one of the most well-liked among aspiring home-based students. In contrast to synchronous learning, which requires everyone to be practically present at the same time, UI distant learning primarily uses asynchronous learning, in which participants receive course materials on their own schedule. UI Distant Learning is not a weekend part-time programme, in contrast to the majority of other distance learning programmes. Except for the duration of 6–8 weeks of interactive sessions per session, the programme does not include lectures on weekends or at any other time. Students can study alone or in groups after receiving their study materials (from the university website or specific offices). The time allotted for lectures is frequently near the conclusion of the session, right before an exam. In spite of the internet age, UI distant learning in Nigeria still involves students physically meeting with their instructors or resource people.

Although there are proposals to make the exams online-based, they are now all administered on the University of Ibadan campus. A student must complete a six-year course in the standard educational system in no more than eight years and a four-year course in no more than six years in order to receive an honours degree. After paying the necessary fees, each student is entitled to a study pack at the start of a session. The package includes course materials, a CD, an audio CD, and pertinent details about the centre and resource people to enable ongoing interaction between students and the resource people. Before an eight-week interactive time for lessons and examinations, students must engage with the course contents for at least eight months.

Factors Affecting UI Distance Learning in the Digital World

UI DLC is having a hard time giving those who could study at home while working access to university education. The percentage of students who enrol, continue, and complete their academic courses at the same institution is known as student retention. Every stakeholder considers student retention when evaluating a school, from parents to policymakers. Consider student retention to be the same as academic success or successful completion. Demand for open and remote learning has increased since it allows students to obtain information and degrees regardless of their time, place of residence, or other limitations that they might encounter in conventional on-campus education systems. Since the 2000s, there has also been an upsurge in societies all over the world's propensity for lifelong learning. The number of students enrolled in open and distance learning systems has therefore increased noticeably. Despite an increase in the number of students enrolling in open and distance education programmes, some studies indicate that only a small percentage of those students were successful in finishing the registered course in open and distance education (Levy, 2017). Drop-out of the system may be described as a circumstance when learners, for a variety of reasons, either completely leave the system before completing their learning process or become passive, not interacting with the system but continuing to be students. It has been demonstrated that open and distance learning methods have greater dropout rates than traditional classroom settings (Boston and Ice, 2019). According to several research, this condition presents a significant challenge for schools of open and distance learning (Simpson, 2020). According to certain research, drop-out rates from the system can be used to gauge how effective open- and distance-learning programmes are. Many UI DLC students still struggle to finish their programmes despite factors like motivation, system adaptation, congruence of expectations, and interests being met. This is because of issues with the online help desk, the lack of functional online classes, and the absence of functional online exams. Frequently, students are forced to come to the campus for these things despite having busy schedules. Students and institutions typically squander energy due to the time, labour, and money lost when students leave the system (Filgona, Sakiyo, Gwany and Okoronka, 2020).

Open and Distant Education (ODE) has developed into a significant strategy for addressing Nigeria's issues with educational access. It is known that students who enrol with ODE schools drop out of school, despite the perks and rising expansion of ODE. Due to the fact that student retention is crucial to expediting the creation of human capital for national development in a global information economy, attrition in ODE has become a major concern in Nigeria (Ofole, 2018). The researcher observes confusion roiling the UI DLC programme; the programme is largely unqualified to be called an open distance learning programme as the students are required to attend the mandatory orientation and revision classes on-site and students who do not have the luxury of time were forced to suspend the programme for at most two years; thus, if such time were not available over the two sessions, the student is automatically expelled from the programme. More specifically, the UI DLC has overlooked the goal of economic advantages, strengthening the online classrooms, online queries, online assessments and examinations, among others rather than tailoring programmes for working class folks. How does this vary from customary courses and programmes? Given that the vast majority of DLC students are not from the working class and hence feel idle, it is not surprising that they are calling for the compulsory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) done after graduation, multiple semesters, extended orientation and revision periods, among others. Anyone who has five or six credits, including English and mathematics, is welcomed to enrol in the programme, even if they are just sixteen years old (as though the programme is an alternative to students who could not pass JAMB). The programme had already overburdened the system with unnecessary demands, some of which had been granted to the detriment of the working class people who really needed an ideal distance learning programme and had absorbed too many students who did not fit the distance learning programme and did not mind attending school even every day. This situation has left many of the ideal DLC students less catered for, affecting their active participation and retention in the programme. The programme is intended to be student-centered, but a working class student-centered programme is almost entirely different from that of their non-working class counterparts. If the programme provides a backup for those who failed the Jamb or who are too busy with job to participate in normal programmes, a balance needs to be struck.

UI Distance Learning Enrolment Strategies In The Recent Time

In distance education, which is now undergoing a variety of changes due to developments in computer technology and changes in the student profile, new tactics are needed to promote student retention. The internet has increased competition and presented a real threat to established educational institutions. As a result of rising interest in online programmes, open distance learning enrollment is predicted to expand at a 16% annual rate over the next ten years (Jones, 2018). (Allen and Seaman, 2018). In order to adapt to the changes, educational institutions are expected to offer online versions of a number of traditionally campus-based programmes and, in some cases, to establish a virtual campus (Howell, 2019). Additionally, institutions will work together to create joint degree programmes. For instance, Cornell Hotel School, eCornell, and The Culinary Institute of America have collaborated to create a series of interactive, self-guided online courses for restaurant professionals to develop managerial skills. These courses use multimedia technology. Courses leading to a Certificate in Management are jointly offered by the New School University and the Open University in Britain. Some of the features people anticipate from UI DLC are these.

UI Distance Learning Retention Strategies in the Digital Age

Recently, the University of Ibadan has started advertising the DLC programme to students who did not meet up with their post - Universal Tertiary Matriculation Examination (post - UTME) requirements in as much as such move is welcome to having many students enrolled into the DLC programme, such should never be to the detriment of what Open Distance Learning (ODL) programme stand for. ODL should always accommodate and give preeminence to working class learners, a condition to suspend programme resulting from students' inability to attend the interactive revision sessions is too harsh for the working class students who are combining the programme with work and other busy schedules. Their none working class individuals and those very young ones who put in for the programme should be made to adjust to the ODL system of learning and not forcing the working class students to conform to a form of regular schooling system as being demanded for by the none working students. Distance learning programmes should allow adult learners who have employment, family, and/or other responsibilities to update knowledge and skills related to the job by saving travel costs and allowing for a flexible schedule. Moore and Kearsely (2015) indicated that most distance education learners should be mature adults.

With an increasing number of non-traditional students participating in distance learning programmes, there is a change in the demographic makeup of the student body. The curriculum should draw many non-traditional students, who, in contrast to typical students, may already have degrees and may be interested in transferring credits or gaining skills. The school should be designed with non-traditional students in mind who may enrol at several schools, sometimes concurrently. In 2020, Johnstone, Ewell, and Paulson, pointed out that Students have access to fantastic opportunities to apply for courses and programmes that best fill their educational gaps and to be able to participate online from the comfort of their workplaces to accommodate their schedules and learning styles. They can temporarily stop-out or have had multiple transfers between institutions.

In the past 20 years, the number of adult learners who take distance learning courses has increased significantly. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2021) found that during the 2000–2001 academic year, 56% of all degree-granting higher education institutions had offered distant learning. 34% of 1,000 sample higher education

institutions in 2003 offered an entire online degree programme (Allen and Seaman, 2019). Over the past few years, the number of business programmes given online has likewise significantly expanded. Since 2005, online learning has increased by 25% and now accounts for 33% of all workplace learning. 80 percent of managers of training and human resources thought this would keep rising (Bersin, 2021). By 2021, 72 percent of training will be delivered electronically (or online), up from 24 percent in 2003.

Retaining students is one of the difficult issues faced by dlc learning programmes, according to the Corporate University Xchange (2021). There is evidence from a number of studies suggesting students who take remote learning courses tend to drop out at a higher rate than those who attend classes in person (Swan and Shea, 2015). Many organisations have expressed concern about the high dropout rate in online education. Meister (2020) reports that 70 percent of mature, working-class adult students who enrolled in corporate DLC programmes in Nigerian universities dropped out before the programme was over (Power, 2017). Distance learners are subjected to the same rigours and conditioning as regular students, which results in a greater dropout rate than would be optimal for distance learners.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE

This study revealed the requirements for admission into the DLC, the difficulties busy working class students have fitting into the DLC programme, the level of feedback DLC learners can currently get online using UI as an example, the level of accessibility to the DLC online in terms of application and the level of accessibility to the DLC online among the lectures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the University of Ibadan's recent promotion of the DLC programme to students who did not meet their post-UTME requirements is welcomed, which will likely result in a large number of students enrolling in the programme. This should never be done at the expense of what the open distance learning programme stands for. Working class students who are juggling school with work and other busy schedules should always be accommodated and given priority by ODL. Suspending the programme as a result of students' failure to attend interactive revision sessions is too harsh. Instead of requiring the working class students to adhere to a system of regular schooling as demanded by the non-working students, their non-working individuals and those very young ones who applied for the programme should be made to adapt to the ODL system of learning. Distance learning programmes should make it possible for working adults to refresh their job-related knowledge and skills while saving money on travel expenses and having more flexibility with their schedules. According to [Rob Koper](#) (2014), the majority of distance education students should be responsible adults.

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