

IMPACTS OF INSTITUTIONAL POLICY FACTORS ON LEARNERS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN SINGLE AND DUAL MODE DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Learners' ability to succeed academically through the Distance Education (DE) mode remains a major concern and challenge to Educational stakeholders. Literature is replete with the fact that this challenge can be surmounted using effective institutional policies. Previous studies had focused largely on students' psycho-social factors with little attention on institutional policy factors. This study, therefore, examines learners' support services, course material development, information communication technology, staff capacity development, quality assurance and feedback method as determinants of students' academic achievement in distance learning institutions in the Southwestern Nigeria. The study was anchored on Kember's system model, while the descriptive survey design was adopted. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and Distance Learning Centre (DLC), University of Ibadan that are foremost distance learning institutions are purposively selected. The proportional size sampling technique was adopted in selecting 10.0% of learners across 200 to 500 cohorts in the two institutions: NOUN -1,120 and DLC - 636. Learner Support Services ($r=0.86$), Course Material Development ($r=0.84$), Information Communication Technology($r=0.83$), Staff Capacity Development($r=0.80$), Quality Assurance($r=0.78$), Feedback Method($r=0.75$) questionnaires and students' cumulative grade performance were used for data collection. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Product Moment Correlation at 0.05 level of significance. After analysis of data, the study reports findings, and recommendations were made on the need for effective implementation of the policies for innovation and quality assurance in Open and Distance Learning practice in Nigeria.

Keywords: Distance learning institutions, Institutional policy factors, Academic achievement

Introduction

Distance Education or Open and Distance Learning (the universally recognized terminology) is now widely accepted as a "powerful force contributing to social and economic development" (UNESCO 2002). This Educational delivery mode is fast becoming an acceptable and indispensable part of the mainstream of educational systems in both developed and developing countries, with particular emphasis for the

latter (Moore and Tait, 2002). This growth has been stimulated in part by the interest among educators and trainers with the use of new, Internet-based and multimedia technologies, and also by the recognition that traditional ways of organizing educational needs to be reinforced by innovative methods, if the fundamental right of all people to learning is to be realised (Resta, Rumble and Zaporovanny, 2002).

One other justification for the acceptability of Distance Education as a standard component of education and an alternative mode of educational delivery worldwide is the theoretical constructs formulated to guide policy and implementation of Distance Education (Dodds and Tony, 2010). These theoretical constructs have tremendously guided the effective implementation of Distance Education. For example, the theoretical framework of industrialization postulated by Peters (2000) informed the application of industrial production processes in Distance Education. Similarly, the theoretical framework on interaction and communication put forward by Sewart (1993) and Daniel (1996) provided the structure on the nature of interaction and communication that distance learning institutions should extend to distance learners in order to ensure their academic achievement.

In other words, this paper examined the current operation of two Distance Learning Institutions in Nigeria, that is National Open University of Nigeria and Distance Learning Centre, University of Ibadan in relation to the implementation of institutional policies on learner support services, course material development, information communication technology, staff capacity development, feedback policy and quality assurance in order to improve student learning and address the issue of institutional accountability.

In the early period of operation of Distance Education practice in Nigeria, the policy adopted were policy on course material development basically print media. The operation of distance education then, provides written and printed materials distributed through the postal system which developed in every country from the end of

the nineteenth century onwards. Known as correspondence courses, learners generally were provided with study guides and textbooks and sometimes with supplemental reading lists. In these courses, learners were expected to respond to questions that distance learning teachers then read and assessed. In more recent years most distance learning institutions abroad applied telephone, video, computer conferencing and interactive ICTs. The introduction of these served as basis for distributing information and facilitating communication between learners and teachers, learners and learners. In Nigeria, up to the year 2005, the institutional policies in most of the distance learning institutions implemented policy on course material development basically print media. Running distance learning in Nigeria is faced with many challenges. These range from technology deficit, lack of computer literacy and generally poor attitudes towards the mode.

In recent times, efforts are being made to rescue and significantly upgrade the delivery modes of both integrated and dedicated distance learning institutions by National University Commission (NUC). These days, the universities entered into relationship with cyber café operators to help learners become computer literate and provide internet access at affordable rates. Also, there is a partnership with an electronic testing service provider to deliver examinations through its facilities to provide off line opportunities for learners to register for their courses at over 60 centres all over Nigeria. Broadcasting of lectures on radio, audio and books are now also available for courses in the Social Sciences.

From the year 2006 to date, several efforts have been made on other various aspects of Distance Learning Education such as

electronic course material development, the use of computer based test (CBT), staff capacity development through training of the resource persons to better appreciate their roles in facilitating learning because the greater number of resource persons have little training and are ill prepared to deliver quality service to students. Therefore, these policies, if carefully examined, will to a large extent influence the learners' academic achievement in the institutions.

Academic achievement on the other hand, could be referred to as statements that specify what learner will know or be able to do as a result of a learning activity. According to Powar, Panda and Bhalla (2000), academic achievements are usually expressed knowledge, skills, attitudes or abilities that a learner has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of higher education experience. "Learners' academic achievements are rapidly taking centre stage as the principal gauge of higher education's effectiveness" (Ruhland & Brewer, 2001). One of the reasons students' academic achievement are taking 'center stage' is because research as shown that learning is enhanced when learners are made aware of the mastery expectation of their courses and degree programmes (Appleby, 2003; Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002; Halonen, Appleby, Brewer Buskist, Gillem, Halpern, Lloyd, Rudmann, and Whitlow, 2002; Mckenney, 2003). Increasingly, colleges and universities are not only being asked to specify the learning expectations of their students, but to also provide evidence that those outcomes are being achieved (Allen & Bresciani, 2003; Crow, 2000; Wellman, 2000). Thus, the measure of success for institutions of higher education is not just in their enrolment and graduation rates, but also their

documentation of learners' achievement of the learning outcomes associated with the degrees being awarded. This study, therefore, is carried out to find-out the impact of institutional policy on learners' academic achievement in the two distance learning institutions selected for this study.

Statement of the Problem

The practice of Distance Education, particularly in Nigeria, has been greatly influenced by well documented theoretical frameworks postulated by Distance Education scholars across the world. Such theoretical frameworks have specifically focused on course material development processes, quality assurance, feedback mechanism, information and communication technologies, learner support services, and staff capacity development. However, policy formulations in these areas have not received adequate attention from scholars and practitioners of Distance Education as that of theoretical frameworks. Even where such policy structures are specified, they are not primarily tailored towards learners' academic achievement. They are often largely tailored towards smooth administrative and management of distance learning programme. There is therefore, the need to find out how these policies affect learners' academic achievement. Based on this, this study is therefore, being carried out to fill the gap created by dearth of studies on institutional policy factors as determinants of learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions in Nigeria. Specifically, this study focuses on impact differential, absolute and relative effect of each of the six institutional policy factors (learner support services, course material development, information communication technology, staff capacity development, feedback policy

and quality assurance) on learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions.

Research Hypotheses

H0₁: There is no significant difference in the impact of institutional policy factors on learners' academic achievement in the two distance learning institutions.

H0₂: There is no significant absolute effect of each of the six components on learners' academic achievement in the two distance learning institutions.

H0₃: There is no significant relative effect of each of the six components on learners' academic achievement in the two distance learning institutions.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted the descriptive survey research design of ex-post-facto type. This design was considered adequate because it is suitable in exploring relationship among variables and enhances the capacity of the adopter to survey the opinion of the respondents on the issue under study.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Distance learners in National Open University of Nigeria and Distance Learning Centre, University of Ibadan constituted the population of the study. The Multi-Stage sampling techniques of purposive, stratified and proportionate sampling techniques were used for the study. The purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents from Ibadan study centre of National Open University of Nigeria and Ibadan head office of Distance Learning Centre, University of Ibadan. The respondents were 536 (38.4%) males and 861(61.6%) females. The second

stage was stratified sampling technique of National Open University into six strata based on the six geo-political zones of the country while Distance Learning Centre was stratified into two strata that is Ibadan and Lagos study Centres. The last stage was proportionate 10% of students' population across 200 and 500 cohorts in the selected institutions: NOUN-1,120 and DLC-636, while the total sample size made of 1,756.

Instrumentation

The major instrument used for data collection were Student Support Services (r=0.86), Course Material Development (r=0.84), Information Communication Technology (r=0.83), Staff Capacity Development (r=0.80), Quality Assurance (r=0.78), Feedback Method (r=0.75) questionnaires and cumulative grade performance average records. Section A of the questionnaire sought information on the demographic bio data of the respondents. These include age, marital status, religion, and level of education. Section B sought information on major components of Distance Education such as Student Support Services, Course Material Development, Information Communication Technology, Staff Capacity Development, Quality Assurance and Feedback Method. The questionnaire was on a four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD) for the respondents to rate their responses. The instrument had earlier been validated by experts in Distance Education and educational management. Out of 1,756 questionnaires distributed to the respondents, 1,397 were retrieved for analysis of results. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Table 1: ANOVA Table showing the significant difference in the impact of institutional policy factors on learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Learner support services	Between Groups	15229.991	16	951.874	115.616	.000
	Within Groups	11353.356	1379	8.233		
	Total	26583.347	1395			
Course materials and design development	Between Groups	4647.443	16	290.465	96.182	.000
	Within Groups	4167.550	1380	3.020		
	Total	8814.994	1396			
ICT scale	Between Groups	6069.527	16	379.345	108.448	.000
	Within Groups	4823.667	1379	3.498		
	Total	10893.194	1395			
Staff learner interaction	Between Groups	10779.137	16	673.696	61.185	.000
	Within Groups	15194.833	1380	11.011		
	Total	25973.970	1396			
Quality Assurance scale	Between Groups	4562.117	16	285.132	37.932	.000
	Within Groups	10373.348	1380	7.517		
	Total	14935.465	1396			
Feedback scale	Between Groups	3796.498	16	237.281	42.911	.000
	Within Groups	7630.779	1380	5.530		
	Total	11427.277	1396			

Discussion

In the table above, it was revealed that there was significance in the impact of institutional policy factors on learners' academic achievement between the two distance learning institutions ($F_{(16, 1379)} = 115.616$, $P < .05$). The null hypothesis is,

therefore, rejected. From the above result, it was revealed that there was differential in the impact of institutional policy factors on learners' academic achievement between the two distance learning institutions been studied.

Table 2: Table Showing the Mean Scores of the Analysis of Impact Differential of Institutional Policy factors on Learners' Academic Achievement in the two Institutions.

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Learner support services	24.1433	4.36534	1396
Course material development	12.0021	2.51286	1397
Information communication technology	11.4162	2.79441	1396
Staff capacity development	19.8089	4.31347	1397
Quality assurance	14.3937	3.27090	1397
Feedback method	11.5533	2.86107	1397
Students' achievement	17.1560	3.12490	1397

Discussion

There were significant mean differences in the impact of institutional policy factors between the two distance learning institutions as follows: learner support services had the highest impact level ($x = 24.1433$) followed by the staff capacity development ($x = 19.8089$), and quality assurance ($x = 14.3937$), and course materials development ($x = 12.0021$), and feedback method ($x = 11.5533$), and information communication technology ($x = 11.4162$) respectively.

Absolute and Relative effects of each of the institutional policy factors on learners' academic achievement.

This portion deals with the examination of the extent to which each of the components relatively affects learners' academic achievement in the two distance learning institutions. This section is derived from the results presented in Table 3 below, which was obtained from data collated on the null hypotheses Two (H_{02}) which stated that: **There is no absolute and relative effect between each of the six institutional policies on learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions.** The data collected from the respondents on this, were subjected to correlation matrix while the results obtained were followed by a detailed discussion.

Table 3: Absolute effect of each of the Institutional Policies on Learners' Academic Achievement

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	9314.835	6	1552.473	499.754	.000 ^a
Residual	4311.784	1388	3.106		
Total	13626.619	1394			

$R = .827$, $R^2 = .684$, $\text{Adj } R^2 = .682$

Discussion

It was shown in the Table 3 above that the combination of the six institutional policies on learners' academic achievement was significant ($F(6, 1388) = 499.754$; $R = .827$, $R^2 = .684$, $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .682$, $p < .05$). Besides, 68.2% of the variation was accounted for by the independent variables while the

remaining 31.8% was not due to chance. This, therefore, reveals that the academic achievement of learners in two institutions, to a large extent is being determined by combination of the six independent variables.

Table 4: Relative effect of each of the Institutional Policies on Learners' Academic Achievement

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.343	.310		4.335	.000
Learner support services	.164	.015	.235	10.981	.000
Course materials and design development	.230	.027	.185	8.350	.000
ICT	.299	.026	.268	11.603	.000
Staff capacity dev.	.164	.016	.227	10.273	.000
Quality Assurance scale	.179	.020	.187	8.768	.000
Feedback scale	-.021	.025	-.019	-.861	.389

Discussion

The result in Table 4 above showed the relative effect of each of the independent variables on the dependent variables: learner support services ($\beta = .235$, $p < .05$), course materials development ($\beta = .185$, $p < .05$), ICT ($\beta = .268$, $p < .05$), staff capacity development ($\beta = .227$, $p < .05$), quality assurance ($\beta = .187$, $p < .05$) and feedback method ($\beta = .019$, $p < .05$). It is, therefore, noted in the result above, that all the six institutional policies except feedback method were significant. As revealed by the result, out of the six institutional policies, information communication technology and learner support services have the highest contribution effect to learners' academic achievement. This is because most of the respondents strongly agreed that Distance Learning Programme would be inadequate without the two main components processes.

Discussion of Findings

The result of findings on Hypothesis 1, which stated that there is no significant difference in the impact of institutional policy factors on learners' academic achievement in the two distance learning institutions was rejected and highly significant. The findings revealed that there were significant mean differences in the impact of institutional policy factors between the two distance learning institutions as follows: learner support services had the highest impact level ($x = 24.1433$) followed by the staff capacity development ($x = 19.8089$), and quality assurance ($x = 14.3937$), and course materials development ($x = 12.0021$), and feedback method ($x = 11.5533$), and information communication technology ($x = 11.4162$) respectively. The findings of this research, agrees with Rumble's (1992) submission that "the goal of most support services is to assist the

learners overcome the problem of isolation, partial separation between learners and tutors and the learning institution. Again, he submitted that the attractiveness of prospective candidates into Distance Learning Programme is measured by the degree of support services provided by distance learning institutions to assist the students to achieve success in their learning programme. Perhaps the most successful student learning through the distance learning mode, is one who is able to utilize the support services provided by the institution to achieve his or her learning goals. Similarly, Harasim (1997) wrote that "one of the most important student support services that should be provided by distance learning institution for distance learners is counseling services. The essence of the services is to guide the learners before and throughout their learning programme. These services include: career choice counseling, pre – admission or pre-entry counseling, study skills counseling, post-admission counseling, leaning achievement counseling and career development counseling.

The result of findings on Hypothesis 2, which state that there is no significant absolute effect of each of the six components on learners' academic achievement in the two distance learning institutions was rejected and highly significant. The findings revealed that out of the six institutional policies, information communication technology and learner support services have the highest contribution effect to learners' academic achievement. This is because most of the respondents strongly agreed that Distance Learning Programme would be inadequate without the two main components processes. The findings of this research agree with Schrum's (2002) submission that "the student and tutor are

connected in Distance Education by technology instead of classroom. This was supported by Arsham's (2002) submission that the most significant influence in provisions of Distance Education is the recognition of technology, in general, and internet, in particular, as a method of delivery courses. Similarly, Lister (1999) agrees that the most successful student learning through the distance learning mode, is one who spent approximately 80% on self-paced online-web materials and the remaining 20% in interactive sessions with instructor and other students. Therefore, the knowledge and competence of ICTs by distance learning students is highly essential for them to achieve their learning goals.

Again, the findings of Hypothesis 3 stated that there is no significant relative effect of each of the six components on learners' academic achievement in the two distance learning institutions. Also, the findings of this research agree with the discussions of many scholars of Distance Education, especially Covington (2000). According to him, every available support services must be seen as truly supportive of learning as the major ingredient for assessing the reliability of the services. Sometimes, distance learning institutional policy factors are provided as an essential component of Distance Learning Programme without measuring the supportive nature and roles of the services to the achievement of the learning goals of the distance learners. The essence of the provision in the institutional policy factors in distance learning institutions is to help the learners to achieve and improve their learning goal. The quality of student learning as well as the will to continue learning depends closely on an interaction between the kinds of social and academic goals students bring to the learning programme.

Conclusion

This study has been able to establish that there is a significant positive impact between institutional policy factors and learners' academic achievement at the National Open University of Nigeria and Distance Learning Centre, University of Ibadan. It is, therefore, expected that if distance learning institutions pay adequate attention to institutional policy factors, students' retention and success in Distance Learning Programmes would be enhanced. The research, therefore, concludes that if the institutional policy situations are favorable to distance learners, they would be able to achieve positive and desirable learners' academic achievement.

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