HOMAGE TO A GENTLEMAN SCHOLAR-ADMINISTRATOR:

A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Abel Idowu Olayinka

Edited by:
Ayobami Kehinde
Oyesoji Aremu
Matthew Nton

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CONTENTS

		Page
Foreword		xi
Preface		xiii
Acknowledgements		xv
List of Contributors		xvii

Chapters

1	An Interview with Professor Abel Idowu Olayinka *Ayobami Kehinde, Oyesoji Aremu and Matthew Nton*	1
2	Discourse Issues and Strategies in Vice-Chancellor Abel Idowu Olayinka's Convocation Speeches *Ayo Osisanwo and Taiwo Ajibade*	11
3	Abel Idowu Olayinka and the Challenges of a 21stCentury African University *Tunji Olaopa*	27
4	Nitty-Gritty of Professor Abel Idowu Olayinka's Leadership Quality *Olugbenga Ajayi Ehinola*	31
5	Correlation between Quality of Academic Leadership and Nigerian Universities Rating: University of Ibadan and Abel Idowu Olayinka Model *Foluso O. Agunbiade*	35
6	Assessment of Correspondence Knowledge and Practices in the Registry of the University of Ibadan, Oyo State Nigeria *Adedayo Michael Akinpelu and Joshua Oluwatoyin Adeleke*	43

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7 Strengthening Initiatives to Promote Gender as a Developmental Issue: Olayinka and Transformative Reforms for Gender Inclusivity in University of Ibadan 55
Chinyere Ukpokolo

8 Professor Abel Idowu Olayinka as a Quintessential Gentleman 69
Temitope Olabamiji Olabiyi

9 My Experience Working with Professor Idowu Olayinka 73
Sunday Saanu

10 Contextual Factors as Predictors of Personal Dishonesty among Postgraduate Students in Southwestern Nigeria 77
Aremu, A. Oyesoji and Ozurumba, Nkechi

11 Normalising Fluctuating and Directional Asymmetric Data of Mathematics Achievement Test and Some Other Psychological Indices among Secondary School Students in Abeokuta Metropolis 91
Taiwo, A.K.

12 Students' Perception of Quality of TestItems and Administration of Electronic Tutor-Marked Assignment in National Open University of Nigeria 111
Opateye, Johnson Ayodele

13 Demystifying the Open and Distance Learning Policy Development Process in Dual Mode Institutions in Nigeria 127
Fadoju, A.O.

14 Sustainable Development Goals and the Need for Inclusive Quality Education for Persons with Special Needs in Open Distance Learning in Nigeria 143
Isaiah Olugbenga Ojo, Mohammed Olalekan Adeniyi and Abiodun Taofikat Adewunmi

IBADAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

15 Learner Satisfaction in Open and Distance Education: A Strategy for Effectiveness 153
David E. Okurame

16 The Role of University of Ibadan Open Distance Learning Centre (UIDLC) in the Propagation of Social Work Practice in Nigeria 169
Ajala, E.M. and Adewole, A.O.

17 Advocating Blog Use for Enriching Learners' Experiences in Open-Distance Learning in Nigeria 183
Ojokheta, K.O. and Odusanya, Olatunbosun, S.E.

18 Assessing the Influence of Student Autonomy and Student-Tutor Relationship in Distance Learning Education 201
Afusat Olanike Busari

19 An Overview of Diversity of Rock Arts in Some West African Countries 219
David A. Aremu

20 Fossils as a Critical Imprimatur in Archaeological Research: Pitfalls and Benefits 231
Kolawole Adekola

21 Groundwater Potential of Olojuoro-Olode Area in Part of Basement Complex, Southwestern Nigeria 245
Abudulawal, Lukuman and Amidu, Sikiru Adetona

22 Geochemical Fingerprinting of Oil-Impacted Soil and Water Samples in Selected Areas in the Niger Delta 261
Nton, M.E., Adeniyi, A.V. and Falode, O.A.

23 Geophysical and Geological Characterisation of Carbonates Bed in Part of Ibese Quarry, Dahomey Basin, Southwestern Nigeria 277
Elijah A. Ayolabi, James A. Adeoye, Rotimi P. Akinwale and Michael O.Okunubi

IBADAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

24 Baseline Geochemical Assessment of Metal Concentration and Distribution in Top Soils of the Lekki Free-Trade Zone, Lagos, Southwestern Nigeria 295
Ajayi Felicia F. and Sabitu Ruqayaah A.

25 The African Geoscientist—Education, Certification and Professional Practice 311
Olugbenga Okunlola

26 Geochemical Trends in the Weathered Profiles over Basaltic Rocks in Panyam Area, North Central Nigeria 321
Adewole John Adeola and Anthony Temidayo Bolarinwa

27 A Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis for Groundwater Potential Evaluation in Some Parts of Ibadan, Southwestern Nigeria 349
Olawale Olakunle Osinowo and Kolawole Issac Arowogun

28 On the Application of Geophysics in Archaeology: A Case Study of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife Iron Smelting Site, Southwestern Nigeria 373
Olorunfemi, M.O., Ogunfolakan, B.A., Oni, A.G., Fadare, T.K. and Bamidele, O.E.

29 Extreme Value Model for Rainfall Distribution: A Case Study of Lagos and the Six Geo-Political Zones in Nigeria 407
Obisesan,K.O., Oyalola, O.M. and Bamiduro, T.A.

30 The Centre Replies the Empire: Post-Postcolonial Perspectives on the Historicity of Post-Independence Malawian Leadership in Paul Theroux's *The Lower River* 427
Eyoh Etim and Emmanuel Omobowale

IBADAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

31 The Impact of Policies and Infrastructures on the Access and Use of Library Electronic Resources: A Case Study of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) 441
Oluwaseun Babarotimi Opeyemi

32 Tripartite Benefits of an Accomplished Library Manager from a Scholar Turned University Administrator 471
Pius Olatunji Olaojo

33 Libraries in Nigeria and the Challenges of Health Information Dissemination for the Attainment of Sustainable Development Goal Agenda of Health for All by the Year 2030 477
Bankole, Olubanke Mofoluwaso

34 Gullibility, Religiosity and Scrupulosity of Nigerians: Antithesis of Spiritual Intelligence 493
Adebayo David Oluwole and Adeola Rachael Oluwole

35 Relationship between Some Psychosocial Factors and School Drop-Out among Secondary School Adolescents in Ibadan, Oyo State 511
Akinyemi, Olukemi Yetunde and Aremu, Oyesoji A.

36 Multimodal Factors of Recidivism among Inmates in Nigeria Prisons: Implication for Remediation towards Prison Reforms in Nigeria 527
Animasahun, R.A.

37 Assessment of Farmers' Challenges on Food Production for Sustainable Development in Oyo State, Nigeria 553
Fehintola, Joseph Olusola

38 Community Social Work Intervention on Participation of Development Programmes among Secondary Schools in Lagos State, Nigeria 567
Olaleye, Yemisi Lydia

IBADAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

39 Social Media and the Changing Face/Phase of Nigerian Poetry 579
Ayobami Kehinde

40 Correlates of Psychological Factors on Suicidal Ideation among Tertiary Institution Studentsin Oyo State, Nigeria 597
Ogundokun,Moses Oluwafemi and Raji, NaseemAkorede

41 Soft Skills and Didactic Pathways in University Education in Nigeria 613
Oludeyi, Olukunle Saheed and Olajide O.E.

Index 627

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14

Sustainable Development Goals and the Need for Inclusive Quality Education for Persons with Special Needs in Open Distance Learning in Nigeria

Isaiah Olugbenga Ojo, Mohammed Olalekan Adeniyi and Abiodun Taofikat Adewunmi

Abstract

This paper discussed the Sustainable Development Goals as it relates to the assurance of inclusive and equitable quality education, and promoting life-long learning opportunity for persons with special needs, in the Open Distance Learning (ODL) system, within the context of the Nigerian society. Considering the myriads of problems facing the current practice of special education in Nigeria, it is reasonable to assume that the education of persons with special needs calls for reform and adoption of inclusive education, if in reality, the Federal Government is ready to promote quality and equitable inclusive education in line with the objective to eliminate discrimination, marginalisation and stereotype against persons with special needs in the country, so as to promote education for all, irrespective of diversity and disability. By shifting priorities and concentrating greater efforts and investment in inclusive education for children and adults with disabilities, there would be enriched quality of life and maximum utilisation of their potentials.

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Introduction

The adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and the 169 targets by the United Nation General Assembly on 25th September, 2015 had been recognised as an unprecedented event that brought about various groups together at an International level, to deliberate and fill the gap which the Millennium Development Goals could not achieved and also expand it to meet the current challenges facing the global community and reaching out to developing countries facing myriads of problems in various facets of human endeavor, especially in the area of quality education. The Sustainable Development Goals have a well-placed

priority to increase awareness of human right in education, through the provision of inclusive and equitable quality education for all, irrespective of disability and bridging the growing inequalities between the provision of quality education for children with special needs and the regular school children without disabilities. The Sustainable Development Goals are universal and set to be achieved globally by 2030. It encompasses challenges facing both developed and developing countries, as well as rich and poor countries. The goals range from ending poverty in all its forms, everywhere, to ending hunger, to ensuring inclusive, equitable and quality education, and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all, to strengthening the needs for implementation and revitalising the global partnership for sustainable development.

The Federal Government of Nigeria is not left out in adopting global trends and policies in the education sector. Over the years, the education sector has launched various developmental goals to align with the global demand for provision of quality education. Such programmes include Millennium Development Goals, Education For All (EFA), Universal Basic Education and the current inclusive Education which is yet to be fully established due to various factors, such as legislation, funding, dispositional attitude of administrators, among others.

The current trend of inclusive and equitable quality education had been the focus at the global levels, advocating for persons with special needs to have equal access to quality education regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic and other needs. According to the National Centre on Education Restructuring and Inclusion (1995), inclusive education means, providing to all students, including those with significant disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services, with the needed supplementary aids and support services, in age appropriate classrooms, in order to prepare students for productive lives as full members of society. It is based on Wolfenberger's principles of normalisation that all individuals be educated in an environment as close to normal as possible. Agomoh (2010) defines inclusive education as an educational system that provides every child an opportunity to be educated in the neighbourhood school environment, irrespective of his/her disability status. The children learn alongside their counterparts without disabilities, and their needs are met through provision of facilities relevant to guiding and assisting their learning. Inclusive education is designed to eliminate social exclusion, arising from attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability (Ainscow 2004). In this type of educational setting, individuals with diverse needs, including learners with disabilities, different languages

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and cultures, different homes and family lives, different interests and ways of learning, are exposed to teaching strategies that reach them as individual learners, without the stigmatisation that comes with separation (NVPIE-Nevada Partnership for Inclusive Education).

The advent of Inclusive education at the global level could be linked to the Education for All agenda of the 1990 Jomtien World Conference, which provided the platform for equal access in education. According to the conference report, every person-child, youth and adult should be able to benefit from educational opportunities which would meet their basic learning needs (World Conference for Education for All 1990). This development was followed by the 1994 Education Report which gave the idea of inclusive education a larger impetus. Equally, the marginalisation and exclusion of learners from educational system was seriously addressed at the Dakar World Education forum in April 2000, with the following warning that the key challenge is to ensure that a broad vision of Education for All as an inclusive concept is reflected in national government and funding agency policies (UNESCO 2000). According to Adetoro (2014), the present practice of educational programmes for persons with disabilities is a total deviation from what is expected in order to realise the objective of inclusive education. Adetoro maintains that there is the need for Nigeria to re-examine and review her national policy on education, in favour of inclusive education rather than the so called "special education".

Special Education in Nigeria

National Policy on Education (2004) defines Special Education as an educational programme designed to cater for three categories of individuals. These groups of individuals are: The Disabled, including people with physical, visual, hearing, mental, emotional, social, speech, learning and multiple impairments; The Disadvantaged, involving the children of nomadic pastorals, migrant fisher folks, migrant farmers, hunters, among thers, and the Gifted and Talented involving people (Children and Adults) who have a high intelligent quotient and are endowed with special traits in arts, creativity, music, leadership, intellectual precocity and the like, and therefore find themselves insufficiently challenged by the regular schools (Federal Government of Nigeria 2004). The purpose of education for people with special needs is hinged on the philosophy as stipulated in the *National Policy on Education* (FGN 2004). The document is established to:

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(1) give concrete meaning to the idea of equalising educational opportunities for all children, their physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities, notwithstanding;
(2) provide adequate education for all persons with special needs, that they may fully contribute their own quota to the development of the nation.
(3) provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted and talented children to develop their talents, natural endowments/traits at their own pace in the interest of the nation.
(4) design a diversified and appropriate curriculum for all the beneficiaries (p. 48).

Lee (2011) and Oyundoyin (2013) identified the categories of special needs individuals to include the following: Visual impairment, speech and language impairment, intellectual disabilities, hearing impairment, emotional and behavioural disorders, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, gifted and talented, multiple disabilities and autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The Sustainable Development Goal 4, emphasising inclusive and equitable quality education for all, has set to achieve the following targets, if genuinely implemented at the national level. This Goal Four provides a platform for a level playing ground for all children, including children with special needs, to address many issues confronting the provision of quality education for persons with special needs within the Nigeria context.

Targets for Inclusive and Equitable Education and Challenges in Nigeria

Target One: Ensuring that all girls and boys, including children with special needs, complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to a relevant and effective learning outcome. The education of children with special needs is expected to be free at all levels and all necessary facilities that would enhance the learning outcome should be provided, but lack of adequate funding by the Federal Government has made it impossible to provide free education for all persons with special needs at all levels. Kyauta (2011) identified inadequate funding as one of the major factors militating against the provision of free education for individuals with disabilities. The present economic state of the country may also pose a challenge to the needs of children with disabilities. However, in most special integrated schools, free education is limited to the primary level.

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Target Two: Ensuring that all girls and boys, including persons with special needs, have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education, so that they are ready for primary education. Attitudes of parents towards their disabled children have resulted to a lack of adequate care during their developmental phase. Ajobiewe (2000) noted that the belief of the society about individuals with disabilities gives a negative impression to providing them with quality education. The society view education of the typically developed child as being more important than that of child with special needs.

Target Three: Ensuring equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university. Many institutions in the country offering special educational training are underfunded by the government, and this hinders their personal, vocational and social adjustment. There is a need for adequate attention to revamp the ugly state of facilities so that persons with disabilities will have an opportunity for quality training and empowerment. When all these are not put in place, it will be difficult to achieve inclusive education for women and men at all levels.

Target Four: Increasing the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. Lack of acquisition of relevant skills among persons with disabilities is one linked to neglect and attitudinal barrier against persons with disabilities. The society has little expectation of their abilities. Consequently, many do not receive any technical or vocational training till adulthood when they find it necessary to earn a living. The present educational curriculum laying emphasis on acquisition of entrepreneurship skills for both secondary and tertiary institution has not been effectively implemented at various levels. Machineries, facilities and manpower are unavailable. Thus, it will be difficult to achieve this target.

Target Five: Elimination of gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous people, and children in vulnerable situations. Over the years, women have been subjected to gender inequality and vied as unequal to the task. These negative attitudes have relegated women in our society and resulted in unequal opportunity. In most developing countries, the girl-child education has been taken with levity. Parents with children with

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disabilities never send their wards to school, considering it as a waste of resources and unnecessary, because they will one day end up in the kitchen. Persons with disabilities often face greater challenges associated with low expectation from their family and the society as a whole. Gender equality and access of women and girls to quality education can only be achieved through advocacy for equal rights and creating an environment, free of discrimination against women. Adequate support service can also help to attain a positive inclusion of women into the society.

Target Six: Ensuring that all youths, with, at least, a high percentage of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy. It is not uncommon that majority of women, especially those living with disabilities are illiterate. They lack access to formal education. There is a saying that the ability of an individual to read and write makes him or her relevant in society. Access to both formal and adult education for people living with disabilities will no doubt broaden their knowledge to understand and learn about life and the environment they live in, to enhance their quality of life.

Target Seven: To ensure that all learners acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. For learners to acquire knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development, there is a need to build and upgrade education facilities (teaching/learning resources) that are child, disability and gender friendly. They should also provide a safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environment for all. Provision of teaching and learning resources must be adequate and germane to the needs of persons with disabilities in order attain set objectives. Ornede (2010) noted that teaching and learning resources are indispensable and relevant to the content of special needs education, because effective learning and teaching process cannot be attained without the materials. According to Ajobiewe (2000), the high cost of special needs educational materials and equipment, its non-availability and scarcity of teaching/learning resources in schools for persons with special needs have been some of the major challenges confronting special education. Sustainable and inclusive educational programme cannot be achieved without the provision of materials and equipment, such as Braille machines and papers, typewriting machine and typing papas, tape recorder and cassettes. For learners with

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hearing impairment, visual instructional materials, captioning screen and resource rooms are all important for inclusive quality education.

Quality and sustainable inclusive education depends on the quality and effectiveness of the teachers. To enhance the teachers' effectiveness, regular training programme should be an area of focus. Educational objectives can only be achieved if new educational strategies and instructions are delivered in an effective manner with tested and proved techniques. This lends credence to the fact that no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers. According to Emaniroro (2009), the quality of education and learning outcome of students depend heavily on the quality of competence, personality and dedication of teachers. Bila (2010) asserted that no nation which aims to provide quality education to its citizen takes teaching profession with levity. Teachers' incentives and welfare package must be sustained, so as to motivate them for optimum commitment and productivity.

Operations of Open Distance Learning in Nigeria

Open and distance learning is used to reflect both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone who is away from the learner, and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure (Ghosh, Nath, Agarwal & Nath 2012). It can usually be described as being made up of a range of components, such as the mission or goal of a particular system, programmes and curricula, teaching/ learning strategies and techniques, learning materials and resources, communication and interaction, support and delivery systems, students, tutors, staff and other experts, management, housing and equipment and evaluation. The ODL system is used for school-age children and youths that are unable to attend conventional schools, or to support teaching in schools, both at primary and secondary levels (Ghosh et al. 2012). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO's) initiatives in open and distance learning are based on its overall priority to ensure the right to education for all (UNESCO 2001).

Distance learning frees learners from the constraints of time and space and offers flexible opportunities. To facilitate instruction or learning at a distance, different media may be used, such as print, radio, the internet (web based learning resources), computer-based resources and television. These media may be used exclusively or in combination, in what has come to be known as blended learning. From the above, it is clear that learners and teachers are separated by some form of distance. Operation of the ODL in Nigeria has faced many problems, chief of which is the inadequate infrastructure and poor technology outlay. In relation to

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persons with special needs, there are no specialised equipment and resources being made available to accommodate them in the learning environment. Provision of learning support services for them in the form of sign language interpreters, braillists, note takers and resource room attendants are grossly inadequate, if not unavailable. The methods of teaching regular students and support services being made available to regular students are also what obtains for persons with special needs, which are grossly inadequate.

There are also no specialised equipment, such as braille machine, mobility trainers and assistive technological devices available to these students, nor are there accommodation services, such as extended time on tests, non-conventional methods of assessments, tape recording of lectures being made available to this set of students. Without these services, education of persons with special needs will at best remain substandard. *The National Policy on Education* (2004), inter alia, had as the objective of the ODL, provision of access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who would have been otherwise denied, and also to meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificates. With reference to the first point, there are currently no provision of access to quality education being made available to persons with special needs under the ODL system, and the sustainable development goal of inclusive and quality education for all may not be applicable to these students.

The Way Forward

The present practice of special education in Nigeria calls for reform in order to ensure full inclusive education. The provision of the National policy on education of persons with special needs cannot adequately meet the standard of the Sustainable Development Goals. Therefore, there is a need to create a platform that welcomes diverse categories of persons with special needs to learn within their neighbourhood without much ado. Quality and sustainable inclusive education can only be achieved in Nigeria, if special teachers' effectiveness is maintained through regular training programmes. Awareness programmes for non-special teachers is also essential so as to foster cooperation among the teachers. Since various interdisplinary professionals are necessary in inclusive education settings, there is a need to build strong partnerships.

Provision of teaching and learning resources are indispensable tools in achieving educational goals; therefore, relevant and appropriate instructional materials should be provided in the ODL format to meet the various needs of learners with special needs. Many of the institutions operating open and distance education in Nigeria are ill-equipped with

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facilities to enhance optimum pedagogy. It is an eyesore to note that in most of these institutions, essential teaching resources, like Braille machine, assistive devices, note takers, tape recorders and computers to maximise the potentials of persons with special needs, are not available. These should be adequately provided for. Also, in order to ensure equity in education, there should be provision of specialised services, in the form of personnel such as braillists, note takers, resource persons. One sign language interpreter serving the needs of all categories of special needs persons is not effective.

There is no doubt that a conducive, well-structured and disability friendly environment is a key to effective teaching and learning outcome in education. Any learning environment for special persons should be accessible to reduce the stress of mobility and provide an easy pathway for both educational and recreation activities. From the researchers' observation, many facilities in these institutions providing open distance education are not disability-friendly. These will need architectural restructuring in order to accommodate persons with special needs, and also incorporate such plans into future building plans.

Conclusion

The Sustainable Development Goals have as a matter of fact provided a platform for broader and inclusive society for all, in every facet of human endeavour, most especially in promoting quality and equitable education, if adequately implemented. The Nigerian government has to wake up to the global challenge and provide quality inclusive education for its citizens at all cost in order to match with their contemporaries in other countries of the world. The truth is that inclusive education stands out among other educational practices and provides an opportunity for all, irrespective of their nature of disabilities, ethnicity, gender or religion and foster unity within a local, national and international community. The exclusive and inaccessible situation of education system of virtually all schools in Nigeria has been the root cause of poor quality education for persons with special needs.

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