Influence of Institutional Policy Factors on Learners' Academic Achievement in Two Distance Learning Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of institutional policy factors (learners' support services, course material development, information communication technology, staff capacity development, quality assurance and feedback method) on learners' academic achievement in two 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 to 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 Coefficient at 0.05 level of significance. Learners' support services (r=0.67), course materials (r=0.63), information communication technology (r=0.65), staff capacity development (r=0.39), quality assurance (r=0.31) and feedback method (r=0.35) had positive significant correlations with learners' academic achievement. Learners' support services, course material development, information communication technology, staff capacity development, quality assurance and feedback method policies contributed to learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions in the Southwestern Nigeria. The management and staff of distance learning institutions should ensure effective implementation of these policies in order to assist and improve learners' academic achievement.

Key words: Distance learning institutions, Institutional policy factors, Academic achievement.

Introduction

The research findings in literature have shown that the problem of isolation of distance learner creates anxiety on learners and teaching/learning process in distance learning mode. This is one of the major issues generated debates among scholars. The focus of this study centres on various institutional efforts in bringing about changes and bridging the partial separation between learners and tutors. This is the reason this study aimed to examine the influence of institutional policy factors on learners' academic achievement in relation to the academic performance of learners and learners' retention in distance learning programme. Learners' academic achievement has become the central cardinal issue in distance education. Ojokheta (2013) contended that the main aim of distance education (DE) is to promote self-study or independent study among distance learners in the absence of regular face-to-face (F2F) teaching. He, therefore, argued that all policy designs in distance education must be related to the needs of the distance learners.

In fact, the success or failure and the overall corporate image of the distance education institution is determined by the strength and weakness of the support services extended to distance learners to ensure their academic achievement (Kishore, 1998). This is because distance learners study through the self-directed learning mode where the responsibility for learning lies primarily with the learners. However, self-directed learning is not an easy mode of learning. This is why most distance learners, as self-directed learners, encounter many difficulties in their learning. Thorpe (1987) listed four reasons why this is so:

- Studying in adult life is always a difficult process with pains and disappointment;

- The task of reading often raises the humdrum problem of becoming bored very quickly and inspires the intensely felt attraction towards making a cup of tea, tidying the shelves, watching a television programme or whatever after only a couple of paragraphs of reading;

- Learning a text is a process of coming to understand it, with sheer memory of the content, an incidental accompaniment; and
- A lot may be at stake for adult students whose studies in effect set them apart from the interest and aspirations of friends or withdraw from their family.

Parker (2003), while explaining the problems faced by distance learners in their study, contended that:

> Isolation, anxiety, and a failure to control the pace of work: successfully are particular problems with those distance learners (who have not undertaken a substantial piece of learning for some times). They tend to have lost (or sometimes never have acquired) the skills of studying. They may, therefore, spend hours reading every word of a book which only needs to be scanned. They may attempt laborious verbatim recording where sketchy notes would be more appropriate.

Writing on the disadvantage of distance learners studying alone, Akinpelu (1995) wrote: By reasons of being denied the psychological security of face to-face contact with his tutors or at least the possibility of consulting with him as when needed, the distance learner is at a great disadvantage vis-à-vis the internal students.

The difficulty of this method of learning creates anxiety on the distance learners to succeed which invariably leads to some study problems. Thorpe (1987) put it succinctly: A student who is desperately anxious to succeed can be extremely deflated by early study problems or poor performance and can drop out as a result. This anxiousness sometimes leads to nervousness probably due to lack of sensitive reading which the distance learners suffer as an independent learner. All these reasons made Wedemeyer, as far back as 1977, to warn that "not every learner will be able to succeed by correspondence/distance instruction since this is not an easy method of learning." As a result of the disadvantages facing distance learners in their learning as highlighted above, it becomes imperative for distance education institutions to design policies for implementation to enhance distance learners academic achievement.

The new training demands and new competitive challenges faced across the world have necessitated many higher educational institutions to undertake profound changes in terms of governance, organizational structure, and modes of operation. Thus, more and more traditional universities are rapidly transforming themselves from single mode to dual mode universities, recognizing the importance of distance education in providing learners with the best and most up-to-date educational resources available in addition to the traditional teaching methods that they receive. The increasing number of open universities being established across the world is highly indicative of this trend.

In recognition of the above assertion, most conventional tertiary institutions in Nigeria are incorporating distance education as a component of their educational mandate delivery. Two notable distance education institutions in Nigeria are the Distance learning Centre (DLC) of university of Ibadan and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). DLC was established as an integral part of the educational delivery of University of Ibadan while NOUN was established as a dedicated and autonomous institution. The cardinal aim of the two institutions is to provide increased access of prospective learners to higher educational opportunities.

The two distance education institutions have well-documented structures on specific areas of distance education delivery. The implementation of these structures is principally aimed at improving distance learners' academic achievement. The policy designs of the two institutions have essentially focused on the following areas: Learner support services, Course materials development, Information communication technology, staff capacity development, feedback mechanism and Quality assurance.

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 relationship between each of the six institutional policy factors (learner support services, course material development, information communication technology, staff capacity development, feedback policy and quality assurance) and learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions.

Research Hypotheses

HO_1:   There is no significant relationship between learner support services policy and learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions.

HO_2:   There is no significant relationship between course material development policy and learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions.

HO_3:   There is no significant relationship between information communication technology policy and learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions.

HO_4:   There is no significant relationship between staff capacity development policy and learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions.

HO_5:   There is no significant relationship between policy on quality assurance and learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions.

HO_6:   There is no significant relationship between of feedback policy and learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions.

Methodology
Research Design
The study adopted descriptive survey research design of "ex-post-facto" type. This design was considered 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
Testing of Hypotheses
Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between institutional policy factors and learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions.
The data collected from the respondents on this, were subjected to correlation matrix with the detailed discussion of result.

Table 1.1: The Relationship Institutional Policy Factors and Learners' Academic Achievement.

	Student support services	Course material development scale	Information communication technology scale	Staff capacity development	Quality assurance scale	Feedback scale	Students' academic achievement
Student Support Services Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 . 1396	.630** .000 1396	.647** .000 1395	.390** .000 1396	.313** .000 1396	.351** .000 1396	.665** .000 1396
Course material development Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.360** .000 1396	1 . 1397	.685** .000 1396	.392** .000 1397	.250** .000 1397	.286** .000 1397	.646** .000 1397
Information communication technology Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.647** .000 1395	.685** .000 1396	1 . 1396	.453** .000 1396	.267** .000 1396	.337** .000 1396	.692** .000 1396
Staff capacity development Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.390** .000 1396	.392** .000 1397	.453** .000 1396	1 .000 1397	.597** .000 1397	.653** .000 1397	.611** .000 1397
Quality Assurance Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.313** .000 1396	.250** .000 1397	.267** .000 1396	.597** .000 1397	1 1397	.671** .000 1397	.500** .000 1397
Feedback method Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.351** .000 1396	.286** .000 1397	.337** .000 1396	.653** .000 1397	.671** .000 1397	1 1397	.480** .000 1397
Student academic achievement Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.665** .000 1396	.646** .000 1397	.692** .000 1396	.611** .000 1397	.500** .000 1397	.480** .000 1397	1 1397

**.Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The table above revealed the output of the Pearson Correlation Moment Coefficient computation organized in a 2 x 2 matrix, where column (1-6) represents institutional policy factors and column (7) represents student academic achievement variables. Each cell of this matrix presents the Pearson's r correlation between the variables, the significance levels for each correlation, and the number of subjects represented by each correlation from which the degrees of freedom can be obtained (for Pearson's r $df = n - 2$). The cells forming the diagonal of this matrix, row 1 column 1 and row 2 column 2, represent that each variable correlate with each other. Thus, the implication of the result is that the null hypothesis (there is no significant relationship between institutional policy factors and learners' academic achievement) is rejected while the alternative hypothesis which states that "there is significant relationship between institutional policy factors and learner' academic achievement" is accepted given student support services r = 0.665, course materials development r = 0.630, information communication technology r = 0.647, staff capacity development r = 0.390, quality assurance r = 0.313 and feedback method r = 0.351 and the p-value (0.01) is less than (<) 0.05 level of significance.

The analysis above signifies that Institutional Policy Factors are pivotal in enhancing learners' academic performances and learners retention in the programme. It also implies that improvement in the institutional policies on (student support services, course material development, information communication technology, staff capacity development, quality assurance and feedback method) would bring about better learners' academic achievement in distance learning institutions.

Discussion of Findings

The result of findings on hypothesis 1, which state that there is no significant relationship between learner support services and learners' academic achievement was rejected and highly significant. The findings of this research, agrees with Aderinoye's (1992) submission that "the goal of most support services is to help the learners realize the instructional objectives of the course by minimizing the negative effect of isolation and the lack of regular personal contact with the tutors". Similarly, Ojokheta (2000) wrote that "available student support services are provided to assist the learners to be closer to the institution thus bridging the physical distance between the learners and the institution.

These services also reflect the institution's commitment to its distance learners". Tobin (1995), viewed learner support services as the interventions and facilities that help distance learners cope with the technology, isolation and communication problems they might encounter. In this view, interpersonal interaction may be regarded as a basic type of learner support.

Giwa (1986) summaries what constitute learner support services in distance education as: Information, counseling, advising, assignment, assessment, advocacy, essence and feedback to the system.

Simpson (2002) also opined that Technologies may be helpful in facilitating these support objectives.

The provision of available learner support services, to a greater extent, determines the appeal, the attraction, and the worthiness of the programme to the distance learners. This finding therefore confirms the belief that support services to distance learners make distance learning more attractive to them. This is because the support services provided to distance learners reduce, to a great extent, some of the obstacles faced by them in their learning situation. Some of these obstacles, as identified by Wedeneyer (1962) are:

- ✓ Developing interest in the task and motivation
- ✓ Readiness for study is a problem as witnessed by the, non-start, the early drop-out, the under-achiever
- ✓ Grasping the structure of the subject to be learned at a distance
- ✓ Learning both analytic and instructive thinking
- ✓ Evaluating progress in learning

These obstacles, and many others, make distance learning a very difficult method of learning. In addition, most distance learners are adults with professional job, domestic and social responsibilities; they may have limited education or have been away from formal education for a long time. Therefore, students may experience difficulties studying independently with little or no assistance from tutors. The provision of learner support services helps the learners overcome some of the obstacles and challenges faced on the programme. This view supports the opinion of Rekkedal (1982) and Taylor (1986) who both submitted that the nature of student-tutor interaction is associated with success in any distance learning programme. Therefore, it can be deduced that the academic achievement of distance learners to a great extent can be determined by quality of support services provided by the institution. All these submissions and various others show that learners support services contribute greatly to the learning outcomes of distance learners.

The findings of hypothesis 2, which states that there is no significant relationship between course material development and learners' academic achievement was rejected and this did not come as a surprise. This is because the provision of well written, well-illustrated, and well-packaged course materials has been extensively researched and has been identified as an important factor in determining students' academic achievement in distance learning programmes. Learning through the distance education mode, because of the quasi – permanent separation of the learners from their tutors shows that one important process through which the learners acquire knowledge and skill is through the course materials. This is why scholars in distance education have strongly emphasized the importance of course materials that are well-written, well-illustrated, and well-packaged. This explains why Bath (1979) stressed the importance of providing a two-way communication when writing the course materials. Bath submitted that:

> When writing correspondence course materials, I was struck by the idea that it was possible to provide some kind of two-way communication within the materials, means of exercises, questions or self-check tests with detailed or self-check tests with detailed model or specimen answers.

In the same vein, the finding of this study agrees with the submission of Ojokheta (2000) that "well-written distance learning materials should not only be written to promote empathy with the learners but must also be written to motivate them in their study activities which will reflect in their academic achievement ". This opinion agree with Lynch (1986) who submitted that every course materials or instructional material must be written in a conversational style, that is, the material must be written to show 1hat a conversation is going on between the tutor and the learners; the language must be simple and unambiguous; the details must be carefully provided but not overloaded; the layout must be progressive, systematic, and sequential in nature; it must progress from the known to unknown; it must build upon the previous experiences of the learners.

When these writing strategies are conformed to by
the course materials writers, the learners
academic achievement would be positive. However, if these strategies are not conformed with it would be difficult to sustain the interest of the learners which invariably affects their retention on the programme. This contention seems to be in agreement with Rekkedal (1982) and Taylor (1986) who both wrote that positive academic achievement among distance learners is sustained through the quality of course materials produced. Therefore, the contributions of course materials to learners' academic achievement cannot be overemphasized in this regard.

The information communication technology and delivery system was also identified as one of the determinants of students' retention and positive learners' academic achievement in distance learning programme. The finding of hypothesis 3, which states that there is no significant relationship between information communication technology and learners' academic achievement, was also rejected. This also did not come as a surprise because it agrees with the opinion of Clark (1983) that the pattern of information delivery in distance learning remains one important ingredient required for success to be achieved. When a distance institution gives clear, accurate, unbiased, and relevant information to the individual learners in a form and at a pace that is most useful to him or her, the resultant outcome can be summrnarised thus:

     Motivation to learn
     Commitment to the learning mode
     Bridges the physical distance between the

student and the distance learning institution
Reduces drop-out rate; and
     Make distance learning more attractive to prospective learners.

Proper dissemination of information to the distance learners is an avenue of bridging the gap between the tutors and learners, on one hand and the institution and learners on the other hand. But when sufficient information is lacking, the gap between the institution and the learners is widened. The learners, may be discouraged and this is reflected in their academic achievement and learning outcomes. But, if there is adequate provision of accurate and timely information, the distance learners would be motivated to learn and find the institution more attractive and worth the while. This would continue to sustain their interest in the distance learning programme.

The best mode of disseminating information should
therefore be identified, for example the usage of the print media should be supplemented with the electronic medium of communication e.g. telephone system has improved greatly in Nigeria and this avenue can be used greatly. The internet facility would also, to a great extent assist the institution to disseminate information.

Also, the findings of this research, agrees with the discussions of many scholars of distance education, especially Rumble (1986). According to him, the world is changing the information delivery system is changing and the use of several types of technologies is also changing. Therefore, the management of information delivery must be abreast of such changes, tracking them for the benefit of quality instruction in Distance Learning Institutions. Any future distance education system that wishes to survive the competition and phenomenal development in the educational scene must be mindful of these changes. The result of this study therefore indicates that adequate attention should be accorded to the information communication technology and delivery system in distance learning institutions.

Also, the findings of hypothesis 4 which states that there is no significant relationship between quality assurance and learners' academic achievement was rejected and this agrees with other scholars and indicates that if success is to be achieved, emphasis should be laid on quality assurance. For instance, McLellan (1997) emphasized that; "additional consideration for planning assessment and evaluation

in distance learning include the role communications technology will play in assessment. For example, multimedia technology provides multiple formats of representations that appeal to a variety of learning styles during instruction". In the distance learning environment, those same multiple formats of representations and multimedia can be incorporated into assessment tools. The graphics, images, maps, audio and video used to convey course content or incorporated into learning activities can be easily posted in online tests. Learners' assessment patterns distance educations are grouped into: informal, formal quizzes, tests, and examinations, and on-line and Networked Learning Assessment.

This findings, has been able to establish that the mode assessment of distance learners influence their academic achievement. Assessment at a distance includes both informal and formal assessments. As Angelo and Cross (1993) declared, while formal assessment is similar to summative evaluation of student learning and includes examinations and projects, informal assessment, which is similar to formative evaluation, provides quick ways for instructors to monitor learning throughout the semester, to discover the more difficult concepts for students to learn, and to guide teaching decisions.

Again, the finding of hypothesis 5 which states that there is no significant relationship between feedback method and learners' academic achievement of distance learners was rejected and agrees with Ojokheta (2000) that the feedback pattern to assignments submitted by the distance learners was a major determinant of learners' achievement in any distance learners programme. When the distance learners are unable to have easy access to the results of examination they tend to be demoralised and frustrated and the resultant effect of this is that they withdraw from the programme or perform poorly in subsequent examinations. Amplifying this submission, Brookfield (1986) had remarked that knowing how students are experiencing learning during the course helps instructors build connections between course goals and learner concerns and expectations. With all this submission, one could therefore, submit that feedback method is very germane to success in distance learning programmes.

Conclusion
This study has been able to establish that there is a significant, positive correlation 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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