Assessment of the Contribution of Open and Distance Learning to Human Capacity Development: NOUN Products as Case Example

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Abstract
The importance of higher education and its link to socio-economic development has long been established. However, that of open and distance learning (ODL) as an emerging education delivery system in Nigeria has not been meaningfully investigated. Therefore this study was conducted to evaluate the contribution of ODL in the development of human capacity, a key factor that engenders socio-economic development in any society, using graduates of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) as case study, particularly given the fact that NOUN has produced two sets of bachelor degree graduates many of whom had studied while working. Specifically, the study examined the extent to which NOUN graduates had benefited from the ODL programme and how well it has impacted their lives in terms of job performance, income, self-image, and interpersonal relations. Targeting the 2012 cohorts, through purposive sampling technique, 90 graduates participated in the study including heads of organizations where they were employed (herein called employers). Using the qualitative research approach, data were collected through interview schedules and were analyzed thematically and presented in the narrative form. Findings revealed that the majority of NOUN graduates reported having acquired skills and competences which were absent before they enrolled with NOUN and that this had impacted their lives in many positive ways. Interviews with employers yielded positive comments in many of the questions asked. A large proportion of employers expressed satisfaction with quality of NOUN graduates and graduates’ job performance. Following the findings, it is concluded that ODL contributes to a large extent in building human capacity. Therefore, the general public should do well to take advantage of ODL programmes. This will ensure that greater number of citizens have expanded access to quality higher education, consequently, helping to achieve socio-economic development both to the individuals, the nation, and the society at large.

Key words: Open and distance learning, human capacity, socio-economic development.

Introduction
There is growing recognition that knowledge is the main driver of development. Higher education, which aims to produce a higher level of skills and knowledge, is pivotal to the socio-economic and technological development of any nation. Higher education plays a necessary and an increasingly important role in human, social, and economic development (Escrigas 2008). Research reveals that higher education is a tool that brings about socio-economic development as well as other benefits to the individuals and the society at large (Hordzi, 2009). This is why most developing countries like Nigeria recognize higher education as indispensable to economic growth and for their country’s integration into the global economy, both through training of a highly qualified workforce and through innovative research (Carnoy 2006). However, access to higher education remains a key challenge to Africa as there are millions of people particularly marginalized and vulner-
able groups who do not have access to higher education thus limiting their capacity to contribute to national development.

Reports by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), which conducts the selection examinations to higher institutions in Nigeria, show that the Nation is still unable to meet the social demands for universities, notwithstanding 104 available universities (27 federal, 36 state and 41 private). It is quite obvious that many people have been deprived access to education because they are required to be present in the four walls of a conventional classroom. It is also obvious that due to limitations in both human and material resources, conventional institutions can no longer satisfy the snowballing population of a country like Nigeria, which has an estimated population of over 140 million people and an average annual population growth rate of 2.38% (World Fact Book, 2006). However, the emergence of open and distance learning (ODL) has marked a turning point in the provision of educational opportunities for millions of people that have been left out of the conventional system.

The ODL system, as an approach to the delivery of education, has gained much prominence all over the world. In terms of widening access to learning, the system has made remarkable progress especially in the field of higher education. According to Daniels (2010), providing access alone cannot be considered a real contribution unless it translates into success. Success as used in this context is not just completing a certifiable study programme, but study programme that results in the enhancement of human well-being, upgrading of competencies and skills which enable the learners to use their new skills and knowledge for development of themselves and their communities.

One aspect of contribution of ODL is the opportunity it affords the “work and learn” students who are not in a position to attend regular university since many people cannot afford to leave their work in order to study. Therefore, distance education plays a major role in giving workers the opportunity to upgrade their knowledge and skills in various disciplines.

In Nigeria, as elsewhere in the world, the higher education sub-sector produces the majority of the workforce that supplies the labour market. The sub-sector is therefore vital to production of the human resources desired by any country to meet its development needs. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is the first full-fledged university in Nigeria that operates an exclusively open and distance learning (ODL) mode of education designed to meet manpower needs of the nation. It was established with the goal of providing educational opportunities to as many people as are sufficiently prepared, able, and willing to benefit from education provided through the ODL mode. This instructional mode is designed to provide students with the opportunity to acquire knowledge, skills, and techniques that may be relevant to either their present work situation or to future career (Okonkwo, 2012).

Establishment of NOUN was timely for the thousands of otherwise qualified Nigerians who cannot gain admission to conventional universities, or who need to stay in employment and study for higher educational qualifications.

NOUN commenced full academic activities in 2003/2004 and has since produced two sets of bachelor degree graduates during the 2012 and 2013 academic sessions, respectively. Therefore, in gauging the contribution of ODL to human capacity development, the graduates who are the beneficiaries are seen as one of the primary stakeholders. It has been established that higher education plays a great role in the lives of the beneficiaries. However, can the same remarks be made about NOUN graduates who have acquired their education through ODL? This question becomes very relevant in light of the skepticism society holds against ODL.
Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of the study was to assess the extent of contribution of ODL in developing human capacity using NOUN graduates as a case study. It also sought to obtain feedback from employers on their perception and level of satisfaction towards NOUN graduates vis-à-vis their general perception about ODL. The study was guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To ascertain the extent to which NOUN graduates have benefitted from ODL programmes and how well it has impacted their lives in terms of work performance, income, self-image, and interpersonal relations.
2. To assess perception of NOUN graduates on quality and value of education provision in NOUN.
3. To find out challenges encountered by NOUN graduates during their course of study.
4. To assess employers’ perception on quality of NOUN graduates.
5. To assess employers’ level of satisfaction with graduates’ job performance.

Review of Related Literature

Higher Education and Socio-Economic Development

It is well recognized all over the world that education is an instrument of social and economic transformation. It is an important instrument for the development of the individual and the society as it is a weapon against poverty, disease and ignorance (World Bank, 2008). Education, according to United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, 2002), is a fundamental human right and the key factor to promoting sustainable development. In Nigeria, the importance of education in the development of the individual and the nation is highly recognized. There is the general belief that education is an instrument for social, economic and political development. Evidence in support of this assertion can be found in the relationship between the level of educational development and the high standard of living in developed nations of the world, such as the United States of America, Britain, Canada and Japan, among others. They are industrialized, modern economies and democracies mainly because they have well-educated, enlightened, and skilled adult populations. Conversely, African countries, with Nigeria as a typical example, remain underdeveloped due mainly to a large percentage of illiterates and unskilled worker force within the adult population (Bloom, Canning, and Chan, 2005).

The belief in the efficacy of education as a powerful instrument of development has led many nations to commit much of their wealth to the establishment of educational institutions at various levels. According to Abdulkareem (2001), a nation’s growth and development is determined by its human resources. The provision of the much-needed manpower to accelerate the growth and development of the economy has been said to be the main relevance of university education in Nigeria (Ibukun, 1997). Therefore, most developing countries like Nigeria recognize higher education as indispensable to economic growth and for their country’s integration into the global economy. Human beings become productive resource only when they are able to contribute meaningfully to productive economic activities.

Some educational economists have observed that at least 12-15% of a nation’s workforce must have tertiary education if it is going to compete in the new global economy (Mboroki, 2011). However, with the high demand for higher education in Nigeria coupled with inadequate infrastructure needed for conventional education delivery, the responsibility of providing higher education automatically falls on ODL. Many countries including Nigeria have therefore recognized ODL as a powerful tool for achieving the country’s educational and training needs and a potent instrument in creating a knowledge-based society in the development of
human capacity. ODL is the mode of teaching in which learners are removed in time and space from the teacher. It uses a variety of media and technologies to provide and improve access to quality education for large numbers of learners wherever they may be.

Education continues to be a crucial means to national development and a well educated and trained population is found to contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of any country (Marope, 2005).

**Concept of Human Capacity Development**

Any effort to increase human knowledge, enhance skills and productivity and stimulate resourcefulness of individuals is an effort in human capacity development. According to Akingbade (2007), human capacity development is the human capability and productivity engendered through knowledge and skills acquired from education, training and experience; and facilitated by an enabling environment. It is the intangible factor of the production process that contributes to human intellect, skills and competencies in the production and provision of goods and services. Human capacity development is about supporting and investing in people, using a variety of means, including education, training, coaching, mentoring, internships, capacity building programmes, organizational development and human resource management. It, therefore, implies building an appropriate balance and critical mass of human resource base and providing an enabling environment for all individuals to be fully engaged and contribute to development efforts. According to Adamu (2002), human capital formation transcends mere acquisition of intellectual ability through formal education system towards the transformation of the total person to enhance his/her productivity. He argued that human capital investment is an indispensable component of the development process and a force that can help in tackling inequalities and poverty in any nation.

Anuwar Ali (2008) notes that the role of universities in human capital development can be seen in two ways; first, to supply the skills for national economies; and secondly, on the demand side, to increase the drive within the national population for a process of “up-skilling” by opening doors to greater access in higher education. ODL has been, and continues to be a viable way through which professionals may enhance their professional competencies while continuing to work, thus earning a living while learning (Braimoh, 2010). Therefore, ODL is seen as enabling human capacity development.

One of the key drivers of the global knowledge and sustainable development in the world today is capacity building in human capital. It has been established that quality of human capital determines the rate of growth and development of a nation, state and society. The people, with their capabilities and competences, create the wealth in any society by their productive activities; hence development can only be achieved by a society that has developed its citizenry for efficient productive activities.

**Statement of the Problem and Justification for the Study**

The importance of higher education and its link to socio-economic development has long been established. However, the importance/potential of open and distance learning (ODL) as an emerging education delivery system in a developing country like Nigeria has not been meaningfully investigated. Most previous studies which had assessed the contribution of ODL to human capacity development had been non-empirical research (e.g. Suman, 2010). Besides, some of these studies tend to focus primarily at the level of input and use learners as subjects of study (e.g. Mohamed and Victor, 2012) - in this case ‘the cart is put before the horse’ rather than at the level of output (products) as exemplified in the present study. According to Kolimba, Kikide and Reuben (2012), quality of ODL
should be judged at the level of output when learners have completed the learning process. Therefore, by undertaking this study, not only will it fill a void that currently exists in the research, but it will also help in demonstrating the potentials of ODL.

Some researchers such as Kolimba, Kikadye and Reuben (2012) have attributed the lack of understanding and knowledge about the potentials of ODL to lack of adequate research, monitoring and evaluation base. Such a database they said is needed to support informed policy choices and to demonstrate the positive results of ODL. The only way to achieve this aim is to subject ODL programmes to continual evaluation particularly in the light of public perception of distance education. Evaluation is an essential element of successful distance education programmes. Therefore, the focus of the study is justified on the need to assess ODL contribution to human capacity development.

Methodology

Study Area
For purposes of the study, Nigeria was divided into three regions according to her three dominant ethnic groups - northern, south western, and south eastern regions. The study was conducted in three metropolitan cities, one from each of the three regions, namely, Abuja, Lagos and Port Harcourt, respectively. This was in order to have a good representation of the geographical spread. The three cities were chosen due to their peculiar characteristics. First, they are cosmopolitan cities with high population density and seen as melting point for Nigerians from all walks of life. Secondly, consideration is made on the basis of their social nature as mini-Nigerian states which makes it a natural destination for workers from all parts of the country - Lagos being the economic and commercial nerve center and former capital of Nigeria, Abuja the current capital and seat of government activities, while Port Harcourt is an oil producing state often referred to as garden city. Another reason for choice of these cities is the large concentration of many organizations and industries both private and public sectors. As mini-Nigerian states, the workers invariably come from all states of the country and would perhaps give a very close representation of workers in Nigeria. Again, the three cities have the largest population of NOUN graduates working at various organizations located in these cities.

Research Design
The study adopted the qualitative research approach, which provides for in-depth study of ‘things in their natural settings’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Henning (2005) believes that in educational research, the qualitative approach is a useful means to obtain an in-depth understanding of an interactive and dynamic phenomenon in this case understanding the contribution of ODL in developing human capacity. Another reason for adopting the qualitative research approach was because of its ability to focus on aspects of a particular subject of enquiry which are frequently overlooked when using quantitative research methods. Besides, this study was designed to track NOUN graduates in their places of work.

Population
The population of the study included all the cohorts of 2012 bachelor degree graduates of NOUN who are working in Abuja, Lagos and Port Harcourt. The heads of organizations where they were employed were also included in the population.

Sample and Sampling Technique
Through purposive sampling technique, only graduates in B.A/B.Sc in Education and B.Sc Nursing were considered for the study. These two programmes were chosen for several reasons, one of which has to do with the practical nature of the programmes and also be-
cause the graduates are expected to work in designated places and so could easily be tracked. Again, being professional programmes, graduates from these fields have the tendency to remain in the same employment for a very long time. In choosing the graduate sample, certain criteria were considered, they include: graduates who were working while studying, who were in regular employment, who had remained in the same employment from the time they enrolled in NOUN to when they completed their studies. Also those who were working in private and public sectors (self-employed graduates were excluded), and graduates working in areas directly related to their field of study. These considerations were meant to control the effects of confounding variables. Statistics from academic records showed that 362 and 1,751 graduated in education and nurse programmes respectively during the 2012 academic session. From list of names that met inclusion criteria described above, 90 (45 teachers and 45 nurses) were randomly selected (herein referred to as NOUN products/graduates). The entire sample was drawn from the three cities namely, Abuja, Lagos and Port Harcourt. In addition, a corresponding 90 heads/top-level managers of the organizations where NOUN graduates were employed also formed part of the sample (herein referred to as employers). Specifically, the heads of organizations were of the rank of head teachers of schools and matrons of hospitals/health clinics. In essence, the employer organizations were selected by means of purposive sampling.

**Research Instruments**

The main instrument used for data collection was a semi-structured interview schedule which contained two sets of question guides, one for NOUN graduates tagged Interview Schedule for NOUN Graduates (ISG) and one for employers titled Interview Schedule for Employers (ISE). Each set of the guides contained open-ended questions central to the subject under investigation and meant to deepen our understanding of the contribution of ODL to human capacity development.

The ISG contained the following questions:

1. What benefit(s) did you derive from NOUN education and qualification and how does this impact job performance?
2. How does NOUN education you have acquired affect your self-image?
3. How does NOUN education you have acquired impact your income/livelihood including promotion to higher level?
4. How does NOUN education you have acquired affect your relationship with colleagues and others?
5. How do you assess quality/value of NOUN education and qualification?
6. What challenges did you encounter during your course of study in NOUN?

The ISE contained the following questions:

1. How do you assess quality of NOUN graduates working in your organization?
2. What is your assessment and level of satisfaction with NOUN graduates’ job performance before and after their graduation?
3. **How do you assess relevance of NOUN education vis-à-vis acceptability of NOUN degree certificates?**
4. What is your suggestion on how to make higher education more relevant in meeting the demands of the 21st century?

Prior to the conduct of the study, the instrument was validated through expert judgment involving two professors with wealth of experience in research. Their suggestions and recommendations were effected to produce a final draft. It was then pilot-tested in order to check for clarity and ambiguity with the items of the instrument. Few difficulties were
reported that resulted in minor revision of the items before the final draft was produced.

Procedure for Data Collection
Graduate list was obtained from NOUN academic records office from which the names of graduate teachers and nurses were compiled, together with necessary details. The process of data collection started with identification of NOUN participants, compilation of the list of selected participants based on study criteria, and tracking each one of them in their places of work. A pool of six field assistants were recruited and trained on the overall goal of the research, the work plan, logistics, administration of instruments and data collection procedure, to ensure consistency in data collection. Each field assistant visited 15 organizations. After obtaining their consents and that of the employers involved in the study, participants were assured that information collected would be treated with the utmost confidentiality. In each organization visited, employer participants were met in their individual offices and briefed about the purpose of the study, after which face-to-face oral interviews were conducted. Thereafter, NOUN graduate participants were also interviewed one-on-one. The data collection process lasted two weeks.

Data Analysis
Data collected were subjected to content analysis and findings presented in the narrative form. The quotes of participants that illustrate key findings are presented verbatim within quotation marks.

Findings and discussions
Demographic Analysis
Demographic information about NOUN graduates is summarized as follows: The majority of the participants were female (67.6%) while male participants accounted for 32.4% of the sample. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 50 and above with mean age of 37.94. Many of the graduates (53.2%) had spent over 16 years in service, 29.7% had spent between 11 and 15 years, while 14.4% of the sample had spent 6 to 10 years.

The findings and discussion that follow are presented in the following four themes: (1) The extent to which NOUN graduates had benefitted from NOUN education and how well it had impacted their lives- job performance, income, self-image, and interpersonal relations, (2) perception of NOUN graduates on quality and value of education provision in NOUN, (3) challenges encountered by NOUN graduates during course of study, (4) feedback from employers on relevance of NOUN education, quality of NOUN graduates and level of satisfaction with graduates’ job performance.

The extent to which NOUN graduates had benefitted from NOUN education and how well it had impacted their lives (job performance, income, self-image, and interpersonal relations)

During interviews with NOUN participants, a significant number of the participants reported having benefitted from NOUN education in many ways including having acquired skills and competences which were absent before they enrolled in the programme and which had added value to their lives as the qualification led to improved job performance resulting in promotion to higher position and greater earnings thereby improving their socio-economic status. They reported having experienced favourable level of social recognition within their work environment and in the community where they reside and indicated that NOUN education had contributed highly to their ability to meet the demands of the workplace as well as enhanced self-confidence to the envy of their colleagues. They reported how these colleagues, having seen the impact, came to them for guidance to enroll in ODL programmes. One female NOUN graduate had this to say:
“...I have benefitted so much from my degree programme, I now know what I did not know previously and the skills I have acquired have affected my job performance in a positive way. Also, my self-confidence has improved. Even the way I relate with my colleagues has also improved. Some of them come to me to ask for guidance on what to do to enroll for degree programmes in NOUN and some of them borrow the course materials I used as undergraduate to read on their own.”

A male graduate made the following comment:

“My degree programme has helped me a lot. I have been promoted given more responsibilities in my workplace. I now head a department. Also, I have gained social recognition among my friends and in the community and I can now meaningfully contribute to discussions. There is this confidence I feel within myself. I feel very happy with myself and feel motivated to further my studies at the same institution.”

Further from the analysis of data, participants reported many benefits they have derived from the ODL programme including greater confidence, improved sense of personal value and self-worth, social recognition, increased job performance as well as improved economic status and additional skills that enhanced their job performance. They reported they were given more responsibilities in their places of work. There was a general consensus that the programme had improved their ability to plan and manage their work including how to better motivate the junior colleagues and monitor work progress. Four participants reported to had risen to their present position as heads of department through certificates acquired through distance learning. They explained that the ODL programme impacted positively on their lives and that there was a distinction between those exposed to the ODL programme who have acquired degree programme and those not exposed to the programme. Again, most of the participants expressed the desire to pursue further studies and indicated willingness to recommend the programme to their colleagues who were yet to enroll. To the majority of those seeking higher education, many reported having already applied and currently enrolled in Masters programme in NOUN.

The findings from this study indicate that with NOUN education acquired, NOUN graduates were able to enhance their economic status as some of them were promoted to higher positions in their organizations. This finding supports the views of several other researchers such as Kolimba, Kikadye and Reuben (2012) who state that ODL rather than conventional learning commands a higher potential in engendering a knowledgeable society and related socio-economic transformation benefits. According to Akingbade (2007), higher education should equip learners with higher level of skills and knowledge in order to stimulate resourcefulness and enhance productivity necessary for socio-economic development.

It could be deduced from the findings of the study that ODL motivates one for higher career advances. This finding lends support to Nyonje and Kyalo (2011) who assert that ODL increases access and flexibility as well as the opportunity of combining work and education, provides a learner-centred approach, enrichment, higher quality and new ways of interrelations. It allows learners to upgrade their skills, increase productivity and develop a new culture. Mboroki (2011) citing Bishop’s found that 95% of the teachers in his study had improved their performance in the classroom after upgrading course by distance and that there were visible improvements in the classroom performance and the examination results of the pupils who were taught by these teachers. The finding of the study corroborates with that of Alam (2007) who observes that education not only benefits those who gain it through increased income, but also helps overall social development. The return on investment for society will be a skilled workforce that will enable global competitiveness and economic growth.
while the return for the individual will be an improved career path, increased earning power and a better quality of life.

From the findings of the present study, it is remarkable to note that NOUN education and by extension ODL provided individuals with advanced skills and knowledge as well as competencies that led to enhanced productivity, promotion to higher level and better income as reported by the majority of sampled NOUN graduates. Hence, one can rightly conclude that ODL contributes in no small measure to developing human capacity. However, this study could not determine if these benefits accruing NOUN graduates was as a result of workplace experience or due to education received from NOUN or a combination of these two factors. This calls for further research to address the issues.

Perception of NOUN graduates on quality and value of education provision in NOUN

The study revealed that quality of education provision in NOUN was highly rated by the majority of sampled NOUN graduates. Of particular interest were course content and NOUN course materials which they rated very high. A high proportion of NOUN participants informed that the study materials were of high standards and that the contents were relevant to their jobs. However, only very few participants expressed dissatisfaction on the quality of course materials and provision of infrastructural facilities, and limitations in practicum provision. Many of the participants also informed that the curriculum of NOUN programmes was relevant and enabled them to acquire skills in their respective fields. The majority of NOUN graduates said because of the high quality of education provision in NOUN, they were motivated to pursue higher degrees in an effort to strive for higher positions in their career ladder. Many of them indicated NOUN as their institution of choice for further studies - this is a positive testament to NOUN’s success in providing quality education for the learners. It is incontestable that the quality of the graduates is contingent upon the quality of the courses and programmes that are offered by the institution.

The findings suggest that NOUN course materials were highly rated by the majority of sampled NOUN graduates. It is not surprising that quality of course content was highly rated because the course materials which NOUN develops are well researched and presented in an interactive mode. This finding corroborates the study by Ofoha and Awe (2011) which found that NOUN course materials were highly rated and comparable in content to those offered in the conventional system. However, attention needs to be directed at improving the platform for practical activity and provision of other infrastructural facilities needed for practical-oriented programmes aimed at exposing learners to more practical experience. This is because the capacity of graduates to perform competently in their chosen profession is a test of effectiveness of education provision. Every professional field of study is designed to help learners in the acquisition of knowledge and skills required for successful performance in that profession, as well as practical experience in the practice of the profession. NOUN education is generally designed to prepare prospective graduates as professionals in their respective fields.

That NOUN graduates have rated highly quality of NOUN education is not surprising as quality is the watchword at the NOUN and it underpins every aspect of the experiences prepared for the students. To ensure quality, all the universities in Nigeria including NOUN are assessed through an accreditation team of the National Universities Commission (NUC). Hence, the programmes of the NOUN, its tutorial facilitation and degrees awarded are all subjected to the same quality assurance as all Nigerian universities. Besides, NOUN has internal mechanisms for assuring high standard of its academic programmes.
One of the most important factors that contributed to NOUN’s success in providing quality education may be the quality of its self-instructional materials that it produces and distributes among its students as well as other support systems put in place to help learners. In distance learning, because teachers and students are separated in time and space, self-instructional materials are at the centre of learning in order to ensure comparable learning experiences as their counterparts in the conventional setting. These course materials have been highly rated not only by the students, and now the graduates sampled in this study, but also by the conventional tertiary institutions in Nigeria who see the materials as “hot cake”. As research has consistently shown, well-designed and well-written course modules engender good levels of learning achievement among students and facilitate effective achievement of educational objectives (Etuk, Akpanumoh, Etudor and Ngerebara, 2006). Also, findings from this study, as seen from how the participants’ colleagues request to borrow the course materials, point to the same direction. According to Schlenker (2005), the quality that comes out of a process is affected by the quality of what goes in and what happens at every step along the way. This explains why NOUN graduates have reported having benefitted positively from education they received from NOUN. The findings are also consistent with that of Osunde and Omoruyi (2004), which demonstrated the impact of teacher training programme by distance to teacher job performance. And also consistent with the study by Umar (2008) which compared results of NTI’s NCE (by DLS) graduates with those of conventional colleges of education showing no significant difference in their classroom performance.

**Challenges encountered by NOUN graduates during course of study**

Despite the benefits accruing NOUN graduates, ODL is not without challenges. Findings obtained from the analysis of data identified the following as some of the challenges that NOUN graduates encountered during course of study. These challenges were mentioned by virtually all the participants and they include: irregular supply of electricity in home, low skills in ICT, inadequate access to ICT infrastructure, limited provision of tutorials, limited opportunity for student-to-student interaction, and uncooperative attitude of some staff at the study centres. As can be seen from the list, some of the challenges are due mainly to problems with the technology and electricity supply. Regular supply of light remains a serious problem in many developing countries like Nigeria, and is a major inhibitory factor to the provision of effective ODL programme. Students are unable to study effectively without electricity considering the nature of distance learners who work during the day and may be forced to study at night. The unavailability of electricity at critical moments of need has serious implications for effective learning. However, the participants informed the researcher that they were able to cope with their studies irrespective of these challenges. Many of them acknowledged distance education as a welcome phenomenon despite challenges.

**Feedback from employers’ assessment on relevance of NOUN education, quality of NOUN graduates and level of satisfaction with graduates’ job performance**

Data obtained during interviews with employer-participants revealed the following findings: on quality of NOUN graduates, the majority of employers praised the NOUN graduates working in their organizations especially in terms of diligence, attention to details, and time consciousness. Many of them admitted there was a significant improvement in terms of graduates’ attitude to work adding that there was reduction in the
rate of absenteeism, lateness, complaints, queries and warnings during the course of study and after graduation. Based on this, the employers have attributed these positive outcomes to the skills that the graduates have acquired during programmes as undergraduates. However, very few of the employers did not express satisfaction on quality of graduates and felt that NOUN graduates working in their organizations had not lived up to their expectations. When further probed on specific areas of dissatisfaction, they gave instances such as use of mobile phone while at work, insubordination to superior officers, and attitude to work. Some of the comments made by the employers regarding quality of NOUN graduates and relevance of NOUN education are highlighted in the box below:

“From all indications NOUN education has proved to be successful. I am overwhelmed by the performance of these graduates and the way they conduct themselves”

“Open and distance learning has gained widespread acceptance the world over and I am happy that in Nigeria NOUN is blazing the trail in training people in employment to obtain degrees in Nigeria.”

“NOUN is doing well in giving opportunity for professionals to upgrade their skills”

“NOUN education will be relevant provided the facilities required to drive its implementation is readily available”

“I will like to employ another NOUN graduate as additional staff having seen how the staff who graduated from NOUN carry out his job function”

“NOUN graduate working here is exceptional, she does her work well and her general attitude to work is highly commendable”

From the above quotes it is evident that many employers held high perception regarding NOUN education and NOUN graduates. This finding seems contrary to expectation as employers were often perceived as being unfavourably disposed to distance education. Again from the findings of the study, a significant number of employers indicated satisfaction with graduates’ job performance. Almost three-quarters felt that NOUN graduates carried out their job function without requesting or requiring supervisory assistance - which goes to show how well the graduates carry out their job function. According to the employers, they would consider employing NOUN graduates in the future and would also recommend same to other organizations that want to hire graduates. When probed further about their views on the usefulness of NOUN education vis-à-vis acceptability of NOUN degree certificate, the majority reported in the affirmative while very few held contrary opinion. Those who objected based their concern on accreditation issues, not knowing that NOUN programmes were accredited. When asked whether the degree certificate could earn promotion for NOUN graduates, a significant percentage of the employers consented and mentioned that many of the NOUN graduates had already been promoted based on their experience but that with the degree certificate some of the graduates had been upgraded to some administrative and managerial positions. This finding came out in the expected direction as many of the sampled graduates had spent several years in service before their enrolment in NOUN. This means that the education they acquired coupled with years of experience spent on the job may have added to the positive outcomes being reported. However, only very few employers reported skepticism regarding the usefulness of NOUN. Furthermore, many employers reported that NOUN graduates actually possessed special attributes which had earned them appointments as members into various committees and some of them received commendations, awards and recognition. They added that these attributes were lacking in some of their counterparts who did not enroll for degree programme. Thus, the implication is that the certificate the graduates have acquired was an added advantage for further promotion and improvement in their profession.
Employers’ comments provided in the foregoing section indicate that they were pleased about quality of NOUN graduates and satisfied with graduates job performance.

**Limitations**

Although care was taken to ensure rigor of the study design, a major limitation of this study is in relation to the sample. This study was conducted using a purposive sample of selected graduates who met study criteria. They are certainly not true representation of all NOUN graduates. The study is therefore limited in terms of generalization of the research finding. Another limitation which I rather refer to as a challenge is that of time factor. It takes real much time to conduct tracer study of this nature because the participants are usually geographically dispersed. For instance, the effort made at contacting NOUN graduates, compiling the list of selected graduates based on study criteria, and then tracking each one of them in their places of work was a time consuming exercise. In spite of these limitations and challenges, the conduct of this study has been worthwhile.

**Conclusion**

The main focus of this study was to ascertain the extent to which NOUN graduates had benefitted from ODL programmes and how well it had impacted their lives (job performance, income, self-image, and interpersonal relations). The findings from this study indicated that NOUN graduates were reaping tremendous benefits from education they obtained from NOUN which seems to impact their lives in many positive ways financially, socially and psychologically. These benefits include advanced skills acquired which engendered more productivity and which led to better income, improved self-image and favourable social recognition in the society. Also, evidence yielded by the study indicates that contrary to general perception and skepticism against ODL, many employers held high perception towards NOUN graduates and also expressed satisfaction with graduates’ job performance. Again, it is evident that the majority of employers acknowledged the potentials of NOUN education in building the capacity of learners. It is instructive to note that the findings based on graduates’ assessment of themselves corroborated that of the employers.

The findings of the study have demonstrated that ODL has potential to enhance human capacity. Thus, in a way, this study would help to refute the stereotyped negative view about ODL whose delivery method is different from that of the conventional system. It is well known that the public has yet to fully embrace distance education; therefore the result of this study holds a great promise in that it will help to instigate public acceptance and for the public to see ODL as an avenue to develop human capacity. Therefore, the public is advised to take advantage of ODL programmes. This will ensure that greater number of citizens have expanded access to quality higher education, consequently helping to achieve socio-economic development both to the individuals, the nation, and the society at large.

**Recommendations**

Arising from this study, some recommendations are proffered. Because of the correlation between higher education (ODL inclusive) and development, investment in higher education is important, especially in the developing world. The Nigerian Government and indeed African governments may therefore, do well to increase investment in higher education especially ODL as a mechanism for speeding up the development process in the continent. It is suggested that NOUN should consolidate on its programmes to sustain the positive comments made by graduates and employers. It also needs to take measures to address some of the challenges that the graduates have mentioned. Again, there is
need for NOUN to conduct tracer study of this kind regularly and their findings utilized in the decision-making process of the institution.

**Suggestions for further research**

Several recommendations for future research can be derived from this study. As remarked earlier, it was outside the scope of this study to determine whether the benefits that NOUN graduates reportedly derived from the ODL programme were as a result of workplace experience or education received from NOUN. More research needs to be directed in this area in order to determine what proportion of the benefits could be attributed to workplace experience and what proportion could be attributed to NOUN education received. Also, the present study was a case study that used only a small sample of subjects. More search work should be undertaken using more subjects. Although the results of this study cannot be generalized past the participants involved having used purposive sampling technique, future work could build on the results of the present study by using a larger and more representative sample that would ensure generalization of results across all NOUN graduates.
References


