



EXPLORING POVERTY AS A MAJOR CHALLENGE TO DISTANCE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to explore the problem of poverty as a major challenge confronting distance learning during the COVID 19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Methodology/Approach: A conceptual approach through extensive review of related literature was adopted for this study. Conceptual framework was developed to explore the numerous challenges of teaching and learning in Nigeria in relation to the recent outbreak of the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID 19). Owing to the fact that scientists have consistently lamented about the highly contagious nature of the virus, government in parts of the world have decided to combat its spread by reducing social relationship which affected "physical" school activities. Since the outbreak over one hundred countries the world over (Nigeria inclusive) have shut down school activities to ensure the safety of their future generation. In order to bridge the gap in learning occasioned by the spread of the deadly COVID 19 and to minimize physical contact, stakeholders have advocated for the use of distance learning platforms as they believe that it can effectively compensate for the regular classroom learning. Hence, there was discussion on the roles as well as the challenges of distance learning of which poverty was identified as a major challenge.

Findings: This paper discovered that distance learning in Nigeria is contending with some challenges that are most likely to make its implementation near impossible. One of the major challenges of this kind of learning in Nigeria is poverty.

Originality/Value: It was recommended that government should massively invest in technological infrastructure in Nigeria in order to catch up with the level of distance learning in other developed countries of the world for easy switch over in case of any eventuality. Another important recommendation was that poverty should be conquered or reduced to the barest minimum if the goal of distance learning would be achieved; even as poverty alleviation programmes should be well planned, executed, managed, supervised and or monitored and evaluated to ensure their success.

Keywords: Poverty, Major Challenge, Distance Learning, COVID '19 Pandemic

Paper Type: Conceptual

Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a highly infectious disease caused by the corona virus. The outbreak first occurred in China before its rapid spread in many parts of the world. Managing the disease is a lot problematic hence, experts advocate for its prevention as there is yet no known cure for it. While discussing this disease WHO posited that:

Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory

disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. The best way to prevent and slow down transmission is be well informed about the COVID-19 virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads. Protect yourself and others from infection by washing your hands or using an alcohol based rub frequently and not touching your face. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes, so it's important that you also practice respiratory etiquette (for example, by coughing into a flexed elbow). At this time, there are no specific vaccines or treatments for COVID-19.

However, there are many ongoing clinical trials evaluating potential treatments. WHO will continue to provide update information as soon as clinical findings become available (https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1).

The devastating effect of the disease is better imagined than stated as it cuts across different areas of life with the educational sector not in the least affected. Edeh, Nwafor, Obafemi, Sen, Atonye, Sharma and Alsayed (2020) posit as at the time of this report that:

No nation or race across the world is immune from the coronavirus pandemic, and the entire world seems overwhelmed by the speed of the spread and the devastating effects of COVID-19. The coronavirus pandemic has no boundaries, and the effect is large and fast. Just within few months of the outbreak of the disease, it has drastically changed the lifestyles of the entire world with billions of people being forced to 'stay at home', 'observe self-isolations', and work and learn from home...Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) outbreak poses serious concerns to global education systems. Efforts to contain COVID-19 prompted unscheduled closure of schools in more than 100 countries worldwide. COVID-19 school closures left over one billion learners out of school (p. 11)

Owing to the highly contagious nature of the said disease the Nigerian government decided to lockdown schools but concerned individuals are already lamenting the damaging effect of this lockdown on the educational sector. Hence, Edeh, et al's study underscores the need for all educational institutions, educators, and learners to adopt technology, and improve their digital skills in line with the emerging global trends and realities in education. Advocating for and the use of technology and distance learning is a good alternative to the traditional method of teaching and learning. But this type of learning is also met with numerous challenges one of which is poverty. Reporting on this issue Ettang (2020) said that while the coronavirus has forced schools globally to switch to online learning, in

developing countries like Nigeria, millions of children without remote- learning access have been left behind as forty percent of Nigerians live on less than \$1 a day, only one in four have internet access. Furthermore, Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics says only one in four Nigerians have internet access but three out of four have mobile phones. Babangida (as reported in Ettang, 2020) said that while some Nigerians have been able to switch to online and social media learning, there are challenges. "Looking at the cost of data, and even the devices to use for effective learning, it is a bit problematic to Nigerians. I think if the government can do something about it, it will go a long way to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor," Babangida concluded.

This paper therefore, will explore poverty as a major challenge of distance learning during the COVID 19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Concept of Poverty

Poverty is a state or condition in which a person or community lacks the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living. Poverty means that the income level from employment is so low that basic human needs can't be met.

Chen (2020) defined poverty as

a state or condition in which a person or community lacks the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living. Poverty means that the income level from employment is so low that basic human needs can't be met. Poverty-stricken people and families might go without proper housing, clean water, healthy food, and medical attention. Each nation may have its own threshold that determines how many of its people are living in poverty (p 1).

Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (2009) posits that Poverty is about not having enough money to meet basic needs including food, clothing and shelter. However, poverty is more, much more than just not having enough money, this may explain why the World Bank Organization (as quoted in Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, 2009) describes poverty in this way:

Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty has many faces, changing from place to place and across time, and has been described in many ways. Most often, poverty is a situation people want to escape. So poverty is a call to action - - for the poor and the wealthy alike -- a call to change the world so that many more may have enough to eat, adequate shelter, access to education and health, protection from violence, and a voice in what happens in their communities (p.1).

Common traits for those living in extreme poverty include: Little or no education, under the age of eighteen and work in farming or agriculture (Chen, 2020).

Poverty is a difficult cycle to break and often passed from one generation to the next. Typical consequences of poverty include alcohol and substance abuse; less access to education; poor housing and living conditions, and increased levels of disease. This may give rise to increased tensions in society, as inequality increases; and Chen concluded that these issues often lead to rising crime rates in communities affected by poverty.

Myers (2018) outlined some of the major causes of poverty around the world and they include; Inadequate access to clean water and nutritious food, little or no access to livelihoods or jobs, conflict, inequality, poor education, climate change, lack of infrastructure, limited capacity of the government, lack of reserves. Be that as it may government in parts of the world especially in poverty stricken countries can introduce and monitor measures to ameliorate the situation.

According to the UN report, in 2016, Nigeria was ranked the 152nd in terms of living standards (a total of 188 countries were studied), and the unemployment rate reached 42% as 80 million citizens were forced to live for \$1.25 a day, meaning, they stepped beyond the poverty line (Ikande, 2020). Myers (2018) reported that more than 10% of the world's population lives in

extreme poverty —approximately 800 million people. This is defined as surviving on only \$1.90 a day. Though unfortunate, it is worthy to note that Nigeria has a fair share in the already mentioned statistics. The number of Nigerians that are poor have been estimated to be 82.9 million people, this is revealed in the latest Poverty and Inequality report released by the national Bureau of Statistics (Adesoji, 2020).

Over 82 million Nigerians are poor, northern states dominate list. According to the Nigerian Living Standards Survey (NLSS) report released by the NBS covering the year 2019, 40.1% of Nigerians are classified as poor by national standards (Adesoji, 2010). An individual is considered poor in Nigeria when he has an availability of less than 137.4 thousand Nigerian Naira (roughly 361 U.S. dollars) per year.

Poverty alleviation, however, encapsulates the efforts of government, non-governmental organization and other agencies, directed towards improving the conditions of the poor. This is defined as the creation of general conditions which allow man to live in dignity, where people are free to take their own decisions in life, where the poor gets increasingly empowered enough to participate in social, political and economic decision making (Research Centre for Management and Social Studies, 2014).

Poverty alleviation programmes as introduced in Nigeria after the civil war include; The 1972 Gen. Yakub Gowon's National Accelerated Food Production programme and the Nigeria's Agricultural and Co-operative Bank; Operation Feed the Nation in 1976 by the then military head of state, General Olusegun Obasanjo in 1979; Shehu Shagari introduced the Green Revolution programme; later the Buhari's government introduced the GO Back to Land Programme; in 1986, Gen. Babangida established the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), for rural development; The National Directorate for Employment was set up by Decree number 24 of October 19, 1986; in 1993, Abacha and his wife set up the Family Support Programme and the Family Economic Advancement Programme (<http://www.nigeriansinamerica.com/articles/2>

414/1/Poverty-ReliefMore-Programs-More-Pains/Page1.html_br).

In recent times the Buhari led government have introduced: Meals for school children from poor families; Material aid for poor citizens; Micro crediting plan; The Government Enterprise Empowerment Program (GEEP); N-Power (Ikande, 2020) among others.

Despite all the effort at alleviating poverty in Nigeria, majority of the populace are still living in abject poverty. The failure of most of the programmes to achieve their aim is as a result of poor planning, execution, management, supervision and or monitoring.

The Concept of Distance Education

Greenberg (1998) defines contemporary distance learning as “a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning” (p. 36). It can be viewed as a system of education characterized by physical separation between the instructor and the student in which lessons are provided via a set of media, which includes printed materials along with ICTs. It is also largely known as a structured type of learning where the learner and the instructor are separated by place, and sometimes time (Gunawardena & Mclsaac, 1996). This means that it utilizes non-contiguous communication that can occur at anywhere or time, which is the reason why it is favourable to adults having professional and social commitments.

Distance education depends greatly on communication technologies (such as print materials, broadcast radio and television, electronic mail, multimedia computer technology amongst others) to encourage student – teacher interaction and provide the needed feedback to the student at a distance. It uses high quality, self – directed, learner – centred instructional resources that are accessible to students while instructional facilitation is conducted where necessary. Perhaps what can be considered as its greatest usefulness is that successful instruction and learning occur despite the instructor and the

learner being physically separated in the course of the learning process.

The use of information and communication technology (ICT) is one of the tools used by Open Distance Learning institutions in Nigeria. However, many open and distance learning institutions, especially in Nigeria, utilize the Mixed Mode approach. This instructional approach combines the finest features of the conventional classroom with the online classroom to take full advantage of the benefits and minimize the deficiencies of both (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). It usually entails human contact, an aspect that is lost in the strictly online format.

Challenges of Distance Education in Nigeria

The development in technology has led to a move towards multi-media system integrating a combination of technologies in distance learning institutions. However, there are restraints in the use of these technologies. This pertains to the various equipment (or hardware) and their software. In a developing nation like Nigeria, the absence of necessary infrastructure for technological development poses a threat to distance education.

Maintenance is often a great challenge. However, the lack of funds required to run and maintain a robust system seems to be a greater challenge since distance education is technology – driven. Other constraints of ICT used in distance education involve human and administrative factors, access to media, cost of proposed media, teaching role of the media with regards to the goals of learning, interactivensess, user-friendliness, administrative issues, novelty of the media and speed with which transformation can be brought about in the media (Rahman, 2014). Furthermore, the teaching corpus are mostly untrained in the effective use of information and communication technologies in the educational process. Also, Nigeria produces only a small number of ICT-trained University graduates (high quality) each year (Manir, 2009).

On the other hand, the learners may encounter several problems in distance learning. To begin, students frequently do not see a sufficient level of feedback from their facilitators for lessons

learned because distance learning lacks daily or weekly contact with instructors and so the learners usually have hard time assessing their progress. Keegan (1986) hypothesizes that learners who do not receive adequate contact and communication with instructors are not likely to experience complete academic and social assimilation into institution life. The consequence of this is that such students often quit the learning programme.

Also, the unavailability of ICT facilities and support services such as technical assistance may constitute a barrier. Many adults cannot afford these technological devices needed for their learning. They may also not be conversant with using this technological devices/hardware. Consequently, using these technologies will exclude students who lack the necessary computer skills. In a study conducted by Awe (2012), it was reported that students identified inadequate ICT facilities and ICT support staff as barriers to distance learning. This is more so even disconcerting considering that students will receive volumes of electronically based information. Therefore, using this information will be difficult for non – technical students. Thus, learning becomes more complicated since the learner has to figure things out in isolation. It is very crucial to consider this aspect since the substantial proportion of students that enrol into distance learning programmes have little or no experience of distance study and will therefore be at the danger of dropping out of the programme.

Distance learners have anxieties about learning (Knapper, 1988). Most distance learners are already workers, may have families and may likely possess the technical experience to undertake this type of study. There are also implications arising from the attendant cost of the study, which along with other responsibilities they may find unable to bear. Pressures from employers not in support may also add to their existing challenges. The result is that it leads to a greater dropout frequency than among conventional learners (Sweet, 1986).

Finally, Meacham and Evans (1989) have identified geographical isolation as a chief problem of distance students. Students feel isolated and alienated which is generally

reported among distance learners. The 'distance' in that learning takes away the sense of a 'community' of learners since distance learning limits many social interactions, that would otherwise have been present in a conventional institution. Distance students often suffer from the drawback of being unable to interact with either other students or their instructors, and are deprived of the awareness of being part of an academic community. This also limits the possibilities of collaborative learning. They end up feeling inadequate and insecure with no confidence in their individual abilities (Wood, 1996).

Nevertheless, many of problems and challenges are not only technological but also economically sensitive. Therefore, we shall proceed to examine the concept of poverty as a major challenge of distance learning.

Poverty as a major challenge of Distance Education

There exists an intricate link between access to education and poverty. Poverty has been defined as the inability to attain a minimum standard of living (World Bank Report, 1990). Aluko (1975) refers to poverty as "a lack of command over basic consumption needs, which means, in other words, that there is an inadequate level of consumption giving rise to insufficient food, clothing and/or shelter, and moreover the lack of certain capacities, such as being able to participate with dignity in society. On the African continent where resources are scarce and higher education provision is poor, there has never been a time distance learning was more crucial.

Distance Learning has been accepted as a viable, cost effective means of expanding provision without costly outlay in infrastructure (Pityana, 2009). Aderinoye and Ojokheta (2004) agree that distance education remains the primary mechanism for the information-driven age, a tool that bridges the gap between developed and developing communities. They posit that distance learning in Nigeria and throughout the continent of Africa is helping to democratise and spread knowledge, even to those living in remote, marginalised, and isolated communities.

Other scholars have championed distance learning as a means of poverty reduction and

improving access to education in developing countries. Ambe-Uva and Adegbola (2009) contend that through this system, even the low-income people who have no access to education in formal universities can improve their qualification, which in turn contributes towards increasing the literacy rate, which in the long run can be useful towards eradicating poverty. Khan and Gul (2006) found out that distance education is an effective means of reducing poverty in developing countries. In their study of rural development in Pakistan, they agree that distance learning is an effective antidote for poverty alleviation. Olakunlehin and Ojo (2006) summarized that distance learning "is a scheme that affords a nation the opportunity to effectively disseminate educational benefits to all its citizens economically and more effectively, especially those hitherto unreached or denied access on the basis of one social consideration or the other". For the developing world, distance learning is a promising and practical strategy to address the challenge of widening access thus increasing participation in higher education. It is increasingly seen as an educational delivery model, which is cost-effective without sacrificing quality.

It is imperative to note that in other parts of the world, distance-learning programmes have been used to bridge the gap in the number and socio-economic class of persons with access to education in formal institutions. However, the paradox is that this phenomenon appears to have a contrary outcome in Nigeria. Due to the recent outbreak of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID 19), the federal government, like all other governments of the world, declared a total lockdown. This kept millions of students out of school. In other parts of the world, the educational institutions were able to make the transition to e-learning but this transition did not yield the same kind of success obtained in other parts of the world in Nigeria.

The president of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Biodun Ogunyemi, while rejecting the mandate to engage university students in virtual learning, stated, "It (virtual learning) will not work. Let's break it down; when you talk of virtual learning practically online teaching and learning, I think the first question we need to ask ourselves is: do we have the

infrastructure for that? When you talk of infrastructures in the institutions concerned, do they have facilities and if you want to take it to individuals, can they afford it?" Of note, two key issues are identified here namely availability of the necessary infrastructure and its affordability.

Salawudeen, (2010) observes the inequality of access to the technology itself by all the students since cost of a personal computer (PC) or laptop is still very high in Nigeria especially in view of the income level of an average worker in the country. He further notes that the few students that are privileged to have a PC/Laptop do not have the necessary internet connectivity since this attracts an extra cost which they cannot afford. This invariably means that the use of technology will limit or exclude access to formal education rather than provide access.

Folorunso, Ogunseye, & Sharma (2006) note that Nigeria is behind in the adoption of these technologies as there is extremely low rate of diffusion of e-learning and consequently a low rate of usage. The reasons they provide is that, Nigeria, apart from being a developing country and having an inadequate education finance policy, is also highly deficient in the area of engineering and technological development which serve as obstacles to improvements in knowledge delivery, research and other facets of university education.

Ajadi, Salawu & Adeoye, (2008) identified the cost of accessing internet in West Africa. Most of NOUN students(distance learners) make use of Cyber Cafés which charge between #100.00 and #150.00 per hour despite their poor service and slow rate of their server. Besides, it is very expensive to get some of the soft wares because they are not developed locally but are developed in Europe and other developed countries to suit their own system and make their own living. They observed that the cost and even the interpretation of the software put off some of the NOUN students who showed interest. Bugi (2012) also notes that even in the event of the purchase of such softwares, no operation manual, has also observed this or proper instruction on its usage is supplied along with the software at the point of for purchase.

Atsumbe, Raymond and Duhu (2012) in their study found, amongst others, that the high cost

of e-learning infrastructures, high cost of 'air time', materials, maintenance of gadgets and insufficient funds hinder the use of e-learning infrastructures. Akinnuwesi, Adedoyin, and Adegoke (2007) in Atsumbe, Raymond and Duhu (2012) are also of the view that implementation of e-learning will require major commitment of resources and the support of stakeholders in the public and private sectors. Besides, sufficient funds are needed to establish and maintain e-learning facilities in schools.

Conclusion

Poverty has been x-rayed in this paper as a major challenge confronting distance learning during the COVID 19 pandemic. It is clear that for e-learning to succeed in Nigeria, it needs to develop and expand its existing ICT infrastructures that will guarantee its availability and accessibility. Until then, bridging the gap in education to all will remain a mirage. Therefore, it behooves on the government and other stakeholders to device working strategies to reduce poverty in the country so that more people will not lag behind but have access to quality education in the face of the pandemic.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

1. There is the need for the government to massively invest in technological infrastructure in Nigeria in order to catch up with the level distance learning is, in other developed countries of the world. So that in the face of situations like the COVID 19 pandemic schools and the academia will switch over to distance learning with ease.
2. Training and retraining of staff in the efficient use of ICT should be made a priority.
3. There must be synergy among distance learning institutions in Nigeria and collaboration with other distance learning institutions around the world to ensure quality service delivery.
4. Poverty should be conquered or reduced to the barest minimum if the goal of distance learning would be achieved.

5. Poverty alleviation programmes should be well planned, executed, managed, supervised and or monitored as well as evaluated to ensure their success.

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