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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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Assessment of Challenges in Developing Self-Instructional Course Materials at the National Open University of Nigeria



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Abstract

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is Nigeria's only university dedicated to providing education through the use of distance instructional methods. So far, however, the lack of availability and poor distribution of course materials, which underpin instructional delivery at NOUN, continue to be hindrances to achieving the university's vision and mission. There are delays and difficulties in developing and distributing materials to students and Study Centres. Many pioneer students cannot graduate because of this challenge. This paper examines the process of developing self-instructional course materials at NOUN. It reflects on the challenges associated with the quantity, quality, and timely production of course materials, labelled "the hills, the wills, and the skills" obstacles. The paper concludes that there is a need for better professional development in order to provide efficient ODL delivery.

Keywords: Open and distance learning (ODL); conventional universities; distance instructional methods; course materials development process

Introduction

Since its independence in 1960, Nigeria has demonstrated its commitment to education as a tool for national and personal development and as an inalienable right of its citizens (NOUN, 2006). But providing education for all is daunting, considering the country's population (about 150 million) and the compelling needs of its people. The ever-growing demand for education in Nigeria cannot be met by the traditional means of face-to-face classroom instructional delivery. The National Open University of Nigeria was established because the carrying capacity of the face-to-face conventional tertiary institutions in Nigeria was insufficient. For instance, the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) received more than 1.5 million applications to Nigerian universities in 2009, but the facilities at the 96 universities in the country could not allow admission of more than 20% of this number (Jegede, 2009, July). No carrying capacity is set for NOUN's upper-limit admission. NOUN is Nigeria's only specialist provider of open and distance learning at the tertiary level. It is the country's largest tertiary institution in terms of student numbers, and it operates from the administrative headquarters in Lagos, Nigeria, with Study Centres spread throughout the country.

NOUN was established to make education available to as many people as are able, willing, and ready to benefit from it. NOUN's vision statement is as follows: "The National Open University of Nigeria is to be regarded as the foremost university providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity, equality, and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers." Its mission statement is "to provide functional, cost-effective, flexible learning, which adds lifelong value to quality education for all who seek knowledge" (NOUN, 2006, p. 4).

NOUN is committed to openness and publishes many of its courses as open courseware on its Web site (see http://www.nou.edu.ng/noun/NOUN_OCL/courses.htm). It is an equal opportunity university. Like its conventional counterparts, it is subject to the accreditation exercise put in place by the federal government of Nigeria through the National Universities Commission (NUC). The major difference between NOUN and conventional universities is the mode of instruction used (NOUN, 2007). NOUN students are instructed by open and distance learning methods within an open learning environment. 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 prospects.

Admission and Accreditation Processes in NOUN

Students are admitted into the various academic programmes in NOUN's Schools and Centres based on the minimum academic standard for all universities that was approved by the National Universities Commission (NUC, 2005). NOUN's programmes are expected to follow the due process of accreditation of open and distance learning (ODL) programmes in Nigeria. To earn full accreditation status, a programme must have 70% of its course materials available and must score at least 70% from each of the core areas, of which course materials is 20%. Hence, in order to attain the desired standard, the issue of course mate-

rial, which is the mainstay of instructional delivery at NOUN, must be viewed seriously.

NOUN's Instructional Delivery System and Style

NOUN's instructional delivery system does not provide lectures to registered students in a normal classroom situation, but instead provides specialized study materials that are based on self-learning. Each course has material written specifically for it, which students are expected to study prior to being examined. They are assessed mostly on the content of the materials for grades, leading to graduation and certification. These materials are written as lecture units or practical units. NOUN students depend mostly on the use of printed materials, and printed materials are expected to remain a major instructional mode until the infrastructures for total online teaching become available (Jegade, 2009, July). Print is still a powerful medium in many open universities in developing as well as in developed countries (Gaba & Dash, 2004).

Regular textbooks cannot adequately fulfill the needs of students at NOUN because of the absence of face-to-face sessions, which are available at other ODL institutions practising dual-mode delivery. These other institutions, such as the University of Lagos Distance Learning Institute, the University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre, the Obafemi Awolowo Centre for Distance Learning, the University of Abuja Distance Learning Centre, the University of Maiduguri Distance Learning Centre, and the Federal University of Technology Yola Distance Learning Centre offer open and distance learning and are practising dual-mode delivery, but their students are not engaged with self-learning materials as is the case at NOUN.

Finding the right caliber of academics in the various subject areas to write course materials is a challenge. NOUN course materials are mostly developed from scratch; the materials are developed in-house, and course content is aligned with the aims and objectives of the programmes (NOUN, 2009). The house style of the institution guides the writers from start to finish. The institution has to hire and train writers (mostly from conventional face-to-face universities) who are knowledgeable in the course content. Writing from scratch takes not only money but time to hire venues, pay resource persons, and procure support services. This can be very expensive, and it might take the institution several years to break even. Other means used to supplement writing from scratch include outsourcing or adoption of course materials written elsewhere. In both cases, adjustments have to be made to ensure that the course materials are suitable for NOUN's students.

The process of developing NOUN's course materials is relatively lengthy and complicated. NOUN's print course materials comprise a self-study course book and its study guide. Most of the course materials are produced in hard copy, some are put on CD, while some are available both in hard copy and on the Web.

Writing for open and distance learning is difficult because authors need to use certain styles and techniques that are very different from those used in traditional course writing. Materials are meant to take over the teacher's lecturing responsibilities, as is the case in many other distance learning environments. Writers should not only be aware of learning theories

and techniques but should ensure their proper use in designing and developing distance learning course materials. Generally, training is essential for developing successful course material for distance education. Specifically, training is important because of the particular style that NOUN employs. Open education resources (OERs) cannot adequately fulfill NOUN's needs because NOUN staff lack awareness of and familiarity with them. Course developers would have to be trained to tailor OERs to meet NOUN's specific course requirements. That is, the materials have to be redesigned using a NOUN template and rewritten in a self-learning conversational style. The success or failure of distance education depends on the quality of its course materials.

Problems/Challenges

Jegede (2010) observed that the “National Open University of Nigeria is today the largest university in Nigeria. Commencing academic activities in 2004 January, the university today has admitted close to 100,000 and registered students in her 92 programmes” (p. 155). Jegede also stated, “The university is in the process of developing about 982 course materials for students” (2010, p. 153).

Unfortunately, the lack of availability and poor distribution of course materials is a continuing problem. There are delays and difficulties in developing and distributing materials to Study Centres and students (Jegede, 2009, January). Resolving the situation is critical for the progression of students and for the institution to fulfill its vision and mission. In February, 2011 NOUN's Senate targeted means of addressing the course material challenge after deliberating “on the pioneer students who had been in the university for about eight (8) years mainly due to non availability of course materials ...” (Senate Decision Extract 3).

In the following section the author identifies the major obstacles to course material production at NOUN.

Course Material Production Obstacles

The obstacles associated with the process of developing course materials for NOUN students' use are presented here in three categories, namely wills obstacles, skills obstacles, and hills obstacles, along with possible solutions.

Wills Obstacles

These refer to the desire, intention, or determination of authors to write/develop course materials for NOUN students' use.

Table 1

Obstacles to the Desire, Intention, or Determination of Course Material Writers/Developers

Obstacle	Proffered solution
Competing academic and administrative assignments are given within a limited time for course material development.	Academics within the system (NOUN) should be allowed to manage some percentage of their working time outside the university's immediate environment for proper concentration on course material development, which is an intellectual exercise.
Lack of spirited commitment to the in-house course material development process because producing such material does not count much in terms of career/promotional consideration within the system	Output of academic staff in terms of course material development should be recognized and rewarded with reasonable points for academic and professional progression in order to boost morale.
Lack of adequate motivation and a conducive working environment for in-house writers, leading to low morale and poor output	The working environment for course material writing should include facilities that enable maximum concentration and the devotion needed for this intellectual task.
Delay in and inadequate payment for hired writers, which makes it difficult to engage the desired experts	Hired writers from outside sources should be promptly and adequately motivated and rewarded in order to raise their morale and sustain their willingness to write.
Lack of copyright ownership and payment of royalties to experts who are willing and ready to write, which forestalls the engagement of the best authors.	The issues of the payment of royalties and of copyright ownership should be resolved by balancing the reward in favour of both parties (NOUN and the authors) to enhance the authors' willingness to write.

Skills Obstacles

These refer to the ability, techniques, or expertise of authors to write/develop course materials for NOUN students' use.

Table 2

Obstacles Related to the Skills of Course Material Writers/Developers

Obstacle	Proffered solution
The skills of most writers/course developers are inadequate, and there is a lack of training, exposure, and experience in the desired field of knowledge. Most of the external writers are not technically trained in ODL procedures and so they have difficulty putting materials together that adhere to NOUN's house style.	NOUN's staff should be regularly trained in course material writing/development through internal and external workshops, conferences, and seminars in order to improve their ODL writing skills. This on-the-job training should be continuous.
It is difficult to locate competent staff who can write quality course materials within the stipulated time frame.	<p>The institution should collaborate with other conventional universities/ODL institutions from which they can source authors with the relevant subject matter expertise and skills for course material writing/development in all relevant disciplines.</p> <p>The institution should search for subject experts familiar with the required subject matter in their local environment and also employ more competent subject matter specialists as regular staff of the university.</p>

Hills Obstacles

These refer to natural/environmental challenges that obstruct progress in the writing/development of course materials for NOUN students' use.

Table 3

Natural/Environmental Obstacles to Course Material Writing/Development

Obstacles	Proffered solution
There is a lack of availability of relevant resources and sourcing materials in the physical library. There is also very low bandwidth for Internet services within the university. Sometimes the Internet is not available for weeks. This challenge is compounded by the slowness of the e-library and the low level of IT skills for sourcing online materials.	NOUN should endeavour to upgrade its Internet bandwidth to 3G to improve access to digital library resources. There should be regular hands-on information technology workshops for academic staff. The workshops should train staff how to search for, assess, and adapt open educational resources (OER), which are freely available for use in the writing of course materials for educational and other nonprofit purposes.
There is pressure on in-house course material writers to submit write-ups within a limited time frame. In addition, irregular power supply, irregular water supply, and haphazard Internet access do not make the office environment conducive for the writing/development of course materials by academic staff. The office operates like a civil service office, where staff cannot work late because the university's facilities stop functioning adequately around 4 p.m. Therefore, working outside of scheduled official hours is not always feasible.	The university should as a matter of urgency find an alternative power supply. A situation where the university would be without light for weeks is a major challenge and a drawback that cannot be accommodated by an ODL institution that is technologically driven. The present power-supply situation, if allowed to continue, will lead to the eventual collapse of the system, which is already grappling with several problems. There is a real and urgent need to improve the working environment, especially with regard to those elements over which the university has control.

<p>The power outages and the slow access to online sources are worsened by transportation and traffic problems in Lagos Metropolis, where staff members spend more than two hours one way daily. The situation is hazardous to any human being's health and thus takes its toll on productivity, leading to substandard output.</p>	<p>There is a need for a dedicated period of time for staff engaged in the writing process. This could be in the form of a writer-in-residence programme to allow staff members time to concentrate on their writing tasks rather than being distracted by psychological and administrative issues. The venue for such a programme should be chosen based on the need for a conducive and serene environment, ambient temperature, regular power supply, and fast Internet facility for easy access to online sources. Other needs are transportation facilities for easy movement within the venues and easy communication between the facilitators and the participants. This programme should be preceded by a workshop backed up by adequate supervision and monitoring for effectiveness.</p>
<p>Academic staff members are being made to maintain official hours like administrative staff. There are administrative lapses between writers and editors, leading to systemic delays. There is a lack of prompt orientation for new academic staff members to help them seamlessly integrate into the ODL system, which is necessary because most are products of the conventional system.</p>	<p>NOUN academic staff should be given flexible enough schedules to do meaningful research, to use other universities' libraries, and to produce write-ups. New staff ought to be given orientations. Such orientation periods will pay off in terms of new employees being able to effectively contribute to the university from the onset.</p>
<p>There is a shortage of academic staff, resulting in existing staff being overloaded. Therefore, many of the academic staff members are not able to take their annual leave, sometimes for up to two years. This puts a great deal of pressure on the personnel's capabilities. The same academic personnel are also loaded with administrative tasks, such as admission processes.</p>	<p>There is a need to employ more academics and to streamline the administrative policies that hinder the effective functioning of academics. Academic staff being made to maintain official hours like administrative staff can be counter-productive. As a matter of necessity, academic staff should enjoy annual leave when it is due in order to maintain good health and general well-being, which is needed for psychological balance and productivity.</p>

Conclusion

Nigeria has adopted ODL because the carrying capacity of its conventional tertiary institutions cannot cater to its citizens' demand for education. NOUN operates within the context of admission requirements and the accreditation process put in place by the federal government of Nigeria. NOUN does not provide lectures to students in normal classroom settings but instead provides specialized study materials that are produced in-house and are based on self-learning. Since the inception of the institution, the timely production of these self-instructional study materials has been a challenge. Many pioneer students who would have graduated by now cannot because they lack the required materials. This paper has examined the process of developing self-instructional materials at NOUN. Various obstacles in terms of wills, skills, and hills were identified, and solutions were proffered. The benefits of the timely production of course materials for NOUN students' use can be enumerated thus:

- students would have a fair chance to complete their programme of study on schedule;
- conventional institutions could use many of the course materials developed for NOUN students because NOUN offers them as open courseware;
- more open content would become available for public assessment; and
- the materials, once developed, could be accessed, updated, and reused as required.

Recommendations

NOUN must establish a stable course material production system. To achieve the desired objectives of ODL in Nigeria and to realize NOUN's vision and mission, the following recommendations are offered. NOUN should

- engage staff, academics, and other relevant personnel solely for course material development and train them adequately in content writing and editing, in the production and publication process, and in sourcing appropriate open education resources (which are abundantly available) and tailoring these materials to suit NOUN's needs;
- dedicate adequate time to course material development in an environment that fosters intellectual reasoning and productivity; and
- ensure an adequate and motivating reward system to attract the right caliber of professionals and to enhance productivity.

These recommendations, if executed, would ensure the availability of the right professionals who could provide efficient ODL delivery. In fact, these recommendations are relevant for all developing countries that have yet to embrace the ODL mode of instruction.

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