

ROLES OF INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIP IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the perceived roles of institutional partnership in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State. To achieve the purpose of this study, the researcher formulated three (3) objectives, three (3) research questions and three (3) hypotheses. The study adopted the descriptive survey design. The population of the study consists of 780 academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and 420 academic staff of National Open University, Rivers State with a total population of 1,200 persons. 480 respondents were drawn from the population of 1,200 using simple random sampling technique representing 40% and studied as the sample. The instrument used for the study is a questionnaire titled; Perceived Roles of Institutional Partnership in the Development of Open and Distance Learning Questionnaire. The reliability of the instrument was achieved using test-re-test method and Pearson's Product Moment correlation statistic was used to obtain a reliability co-efficient of 0.86. The data gathered from the research questions were analyzed using mean and standard deviation while the null hypotheses were tested using z-test statistical tool at 0.05 level of significance. Based on the data analyzed, the findings of the study revealed that institutional collaboration to a large extent will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State. It was also found out that institutional networking and e-learning programmes will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education. It was therefore recommended that universities should introduce institutional collaboration that will allow other institutions to cooperate in one way or the other to enhance development of open and distance learning in Rivers State and that Government should invest more in university education to enable universities have the funds to float institutional networking and e-learning programmes that will promote open and distance learning, among others.

Key Words: Institutional Partnership, Open and Distance Learning, Higher Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Open and distance learning education is a type of education that is accessible for everyone at all times and in all places. This means that this type of education is not limited in terms of the age of the learner, his/her background and even location but that anyone could be part of the learning process from any location of residence or choice. Ghosh, Nath and Agarwal (2012) see open and distance learning education as an arrangement that allows education and training opportunity to be made available to the learner where he/she is not constrained by time and location. This definition presents open and distance learning education as that which permits flexibility in both the way teaching is done and how learning could take place in the learner. It could also mean that the education system projected here can be for one person or people taking it in a group.

International Global Learning (IGL. n.d.) describes open and distance learning in education as any learning opportunity that may be formal, informal and non-formal using information and communication technology, thereby ensuring that both physical and psychological distance is reduced and to increase opportunity for interaction among learners, learning avenues and the facilitator. This definition presents a wholistic information on what should be actual open and distance learning education considering issues of physical and psychological distance sine qua non as well as the interaction interface between the learner, the learning process and the facilitator or guide (institution). Though, this system of education has been in existence for a long time but the rapid growth it now enjoys is as a result of the evolution of the internet particularly, World Wide Web (www), which has turned the entire world a global village, an approach that so many higher institutions now used to partner with each other and promote their institutions among nations of the world.

Institutional partnership is a concept that requires brief overview and conceptualization in order to allow for proper articulation. The concept may have to do in simple terms with two or more institutions that have perceived mutual benefits from one another coming together in order to supply the needed requirements of one another and for the growth of the parties involve. It may be a situation of one institution filling the gap for another institution considering that they would all or both in the end serve the benefit of each other or they are both contributing or would contribute to a segment of the society's needs and for development and advancement. According to Chou (2012), institutional partnership usually results in the sharing of resources, curriculum innovation and for the enhancement of their reputation. This conveys that institutions do not just form partnership for its sake but in order to achieve set objectives or targets.

Institutional partnership could even be conceived in terms of institutional image laundry, reduction in cost of operations and bring about carving out a niche for higher competitive advantage. Trim (2011), divulged that higher education do partnership in order to increase their selling strength and marketability. This confirms the earlier assertion that institutional partnerships should lead to a wider awareness and exposure of the partnering institutions and this has the tendency to increase their relevance in the society. Therefore, this approach can publicize open and distance learning which is poised at encouraging and advancing the course of adult education, and encouraging lifelong learning in both the young and old.

Michael and Balraj (2017), discuss the main reasons why institutions engage in inter-institutional degree programme. Primarily, institutions establish joint degree to meet the need of a changing profession, restructure degree programmes to become more inter-disciplinary, respond to enrollment needs and enhance the specialization nature of some degree programmes. However, there are some challenges and disadvantages, in so far as students switching between sites and the approval process within all of the universities. It has been challenging to gain approval at all of the universities within the same timeframe. Lack of social and political will to initiate and complete the process, poor funding, lack of institutional collaboration, networking and lack of e-learning infrastructure is also some of the major problems in institutional partnership.

Some of the roles played by institutions include: collaboration, networking and partnership. Institutional collaborative efforts can address the challenge of limited resources and can be

beneficial to all involved (Ferrini, 2012). Working across borders can address the lack of educational resources and the need to introduce faculty to new instructional methods. Recently, the United Nations established UNeLearn to collaborate on the deployment of e-learning in over 160 developing countries. In addition, the U.S. Agency for International Development stated that it plans to establish a virtual network that will enable institutions in Africa to collaborate with their American counterparts (Lindow, 2008).

Higher education is an educational process that people get after secondary school education. Akor and Uriri (2020) see higher education as post-secondary education that offer courses leading to certificates and/or degrees in various areas that empowers the recipients for higher productivity in the society. Thus, institutional partnership in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers state is in place in order to propagate the creation of knowledge to enhance humanity and society as occasioned by globalization.

Institutional partnership in higher education is a beneficial collaboration between two institutions or a person and an institution. This could be in business, industry, universities, NGOs, school system and service institutions (Semali, Baker and Freer, 2013). Although, in some quarters critics believe that the outcomes of partnerships in higher institutions have not produced commensurate result in consideration with the joint resources pulled together from the collaborating institutions (Osuji and Nkemjika 2021). Institutional partnerships are put together for several different reasons among which may include to increase the financial base of a higher institution, sharing of knowledge, sharing of technical skills, collaboration for exchange of higher technical facilities, etc., the essence of course is to facilitate competition among sister higher institutions (Trim, 2011). American Association of State Colleges and Universities AASCU (n.d.) disclosed that the benefits accruable from open and distance learning education is that it would enable the institutions to properly meander through the changes in the academic terrain. However, ministry of Education (MoE, 2015) declared that there is not enough partnership, collaboration, cooperativeness among institutions involved in open and distance learning programmes, thus, a call for improvement in the way operations are going on. Additionally, the forms of institutional partnership for open and distance learning in higher education could come in the forms listed below:

- a. Collaboration
- b. Networking
- c. Partnership

Open and distance learning in higher education is that educational practice that uses information and communication technology (ICT) to meet the educational needs of the learners or otherwise it does not permit interface between the teacher and the learner, yet they have a meeting point where views are exchanged and ideas are shared which could be a platform or by correspondence. IGI (n.d.) had earlier described open and distance learning as an educational system that may be formal or non-formal using ICT and ensuring a balance in the physical and psychological distance between the learning process and the learner. However, the essence of open and distance learning in higher education is to make available and accessible education which was previously out of the reach of people at whatever levels these individuals may be interested in it be it certificate or degree (Ferrini, 2012). This is particularly of essence to highlight as in the words of Jegede (2016) which had it that open and distance learning in higher education is independent of time, location, pace

and space. This justifies the flexibility with which open and distance learning takes place. Also open and distance learning in higher education provides.

1. Access and equity for whole national development.
2. Reduction in capacity challenges.
3. Human capacity building.
4. Reduction in illiteracy level nationwide.
5. Providing solutions to probable perennial difficult problem.
6. Spin – off effects produced for other sectors.
7. A means of transforming higher education sub-sector.

Nonetheless, the students and products of this educational type have been subjected to suffering further setbacks upon graduation which may include.

1. Poor acceptance of open and distance learning graduates as good enough for the society.
2. There is no quality assurance framework to serve as standard for higher institutions involved with open and distance learning in higher education.
3. There is inadequate manpower to manage open and distance learning in higher education.
4. Poor compliance with ICT procedure for carrying out educational practice etc. (Biao, 2012)

In consideration of these challenges, there is therefore, need to engage in institutional partnership in open and distance learning in higher education.

There are several steps of engagement in setting up institutional partnership for open and distance learning in higher education which Nigeria institutions could adopt/adapt. They are:

1. Constitute a planning team.
2. Carryout needs assessments.
3. Set goals to be achieved.
4. Set criteria for selection of who should be part of the open and distance learning in higher education.
5. Recruit qualified learners/facilitators of the programme (Wallace, n.d.).

Osuji and Nkemjika (2021) opined that to create an effective institutional partnership in open and distance learning in higher education, the organization structure must be redefined for effective implementation of the criteria or agreement.

Despite the seemingly beneficial opportunities available for partnership in the development of open and distance learning in higher education, certain factors tend to impede the progress of the process. Among them may include:

- a) Lack of Social and Political will to Initiate Partnership: There are schools or institutional leaders that lack the will to push through with a partnership agreement, such complacency does not only affect the institution negatively but the effects takes its toll on the large society as those who would left the cloud and crowd of illiteracy would still be there. This inimical to society growth and development.

- b) **Poor Funding:** Though it has been observed rightly that open and distance learning in higher education is cost effective but that does not mean it does not require money at all. It only means that it is not as expensive as the mainstream higher education system practice. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to state that funding should be prioritized in the planning for institutional partnership in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Nigeria. As funds are required to keep the transmission avenue between the institution and the students open and working (Walisten, 2005).
- c) **Dealing with Limited Resources:** Educators in developing countries are aware that external funding from international development agencies and corporations may not always be available; projects may not be sustained once the external funding has ended. Thus, educators need to collaborate across borders with other institutions, especially regarding the development and delivery of courses (Nafukho, 2007) and should consider the use of open-source course management and delivery software (Wright, 2006). Open source software offers the potential to reduce the cost of the software while providing an institution greater control over its destiny (Coppola, 2004).

The online learning activities should achieve the following: engage and motivate the learner by including online games, role-plays, and simulations; demand that learners interact with the online material with their peers by using the various socialization tools that are available on the Web; encourage critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving; provide opportunities for online practice and knowledge transfer; offer timely, constructive, relevant, and frequent feedback; and provide links to resources beyond the content and the learners. Educators must be willing to contribute some of their own funds and energy. They cannot rely solely on external funding from organizations, such as the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation that support open educational resource initiatives designed to equalize access to knowledge and educational opportunities. The Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa initiative is an example of a successful collaborative effort that develops open educational resources and provides guidance to teachers. This initiative involves 18 international organizations and educational institutions. African Virtual Open Initiatives and Resources which comprises 13 African universities, focuses on developing free software that is relevant to African users.

Collaborative efforts can address the challenge of limited resources and can be beneficial to all involved. Working across borders can address the lack of educational resources and the need to introduce faculty to new instructional methods. The U.S. Agency for International Development stated that it plans to establish a virtual network that will enable institutions in Africa to collaborate with their American counterparts (Lindow, 2008). Thus, the institutions will be able to partner on projects in education, economic development, food security, and health.

Statement of the Problem

It has been observed from recent studies that open and distance learning in higher education has been facing some challenges from developing a sound rationale and vision for the distance education initiative, addressing the problem of lack of infrastructure and the cost of e-learning, lack of institutional collaboration, lack of institutional networking, lack of partnership, countering

cultural imperialism and addressing cultural diversity, dealing with limited resources placing greater emphasis on quality assurance, and accessing up-to-date educational resources. Burke (2014), reviewed that lack of social and political will to initiate and complete the process, and poor funding of higher educational institutions have been major problems and challenges encountered by the institutions in institutional partnership. Open and distance learning has expanded in several forms and dimension but the reason for this study is to review some of the roles institutional partnership could play particularly in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to examine the perceived roles of institutional partnership in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the extent institutional collaboration will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.
2. Find out the extent institutional networking will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.
3. Examine the extent institutional partnership will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The researcher developed the following research questions that guided the study.

1. To what extent will institutional collaboration help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State?
2. To what extent will institutional networking help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State?
3. To what extent will institutional partnership help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated by the researcher to guide the study.

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the opinion of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and National Open University staff on the role of institutional collaboration in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference in the opinion of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and National Open University staff on the role of institutional networking in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

H₀₃: There is no significant difference in the opinion of male and female Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and National Open University staff on the role of institutional partnership in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study adopted the descriptive survey design. The population of the study consists of 780 academic staff of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and 420 academic staff of National Open University, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, giving a total population of 1200 academic staff. The sample size of this study comprises of 312 Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Academic staff

and 168 National Open University staff. Giving a sample of 480 drawn from two institutions in Rivers State. Simple random sampling technique was used. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire titled: Perceived Roles of Institutional Partnership in the Development of Open and Distance Learning Questionnaire (PRIPDODLQ). The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section A seeks the demographic information while section B consists of structured items. It was patterned in a modified 4 – point summated rating scale of extent. To establish the reliability of the study, the researcher adopted the test-retest method. The instrument was administered to twenty (20) university staff in University of Port Harcourt who were not part of the study respondents. The two tests results were collated and analyzed using the Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient and a reliability coefficient of 0.85 was obtained. The data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. The criterion decision rule was that any mean score from 2.50 and above was accepted while the mean score that was below 2.50 was rejected. The null hypotheses were tested using z-test statistical tool at significant level of 0.05.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Questions1: To what extent will institutional collaboration help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of respondents on the extent institutional collaboration will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education

	No of National Open University 168			No of Ignatius Ajuru University 312			
Questionnaire Item	Mean (\bar{X})	SD	Remarks	Mean (\bar{X})	SD	Remarks	
Maximum cooperation within the institutions will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.	2.95	0.86	High Extent	2.99	0.86	High Extent	
Institutions providing access to IT infrastructure will help in the development of open and distance learning.	3.00	0.87	High Extent	3.50	0.87	Very Extent	High

Institutions adding resources together will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.	2.80	0.84	High Extent	2.90	0.85	High Extent
Building infrastructure for international collaborative research will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.	2.90	0.81	High Extent	2.85	0.80	High Extent
Introducing seminars on the benefits of institutional collaboration will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education	2.85	0.84	High Extent	2.80	0.83	High Extent
Grand mean	2.87	0.84		2.89	0.84	

Source: Field Survey, 2020

The analysis in Table 1 reveals that the respondents accepted or agreed that maximum cooperation within the institutions will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education. The table still indicates that the respondents accepted that providing access to IT infrastructure will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education. It was also observed from the analysis that the respondents accepted or agreed the view that Institutions adding resources together will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education and also agreed to the point that building infrastructure for international collaborative research will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education and that introducing seminars on the benefits of institutional collaboration will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.

Research Questions2: To what extent will institutional networking help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of respondents on the extent institutional networking will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education

No of National Open University	No of Ignatius Ajuru University
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Questionnaire Item	168		Remarks	312		Remarks
	Mean (\bar{X})	SD		Mean (\bar{X})	SD	
Introduction of e-learning programme by institutions will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.	3.02	0.87	Very High Extent	3.05	0.87	Very High Extent
Introduction of sustainable and accessible electrical in higher institutions will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.	3.00	0.87	Very High Extent	3.03	0.87	Very High Extent
Institutions having a central campus satellite learning centre will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.	2.95	0.86	High Extent	3.00	0.87	High Extent
Provision of telecommunication infrastructure will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.	2.95	0.88	Very High Extent	3.00	0.86	Very High Extent
Provision of online data for easy access to learning centres will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.	2.90	0.85	High Extent	2.95	0,83	High Extent
Grand Mean	2.96	0.87		3.06	0.87	

Source: Field Survey, 2020

The analysis in Table 2 indicates that the respondents accepted the view that Introduction of e-learning programme by institutions will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education. The analysis still showed that the respondents accepted the point that Introduction of sustainable and accessible electrical in institutions will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education and that Institutions having a central campus

satellite learning centre will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education. It was also observed from the table that provision of telecommunication infrastructure will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education and also agreed that provision of online data for easy access to learning centers will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.

Research Questions3: To what extent will institutional partnership help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of respondents on the extent institutional partnership will help in development of open and distance learning in higher education

	No of National Open University 168			No of Ignatius Ajuru University 312		
Questionnaire Item	Mean (\bar{X})	SD	Remarks	Mean (\bar{X})	SD	Remarks
Sharing of educational facilities will help in the development of open and distance learning	3.03	0.81	High Extent	2.90	0.85	High Extent
Sharing of responsibilities among institutions will help in the developing open and distance learning in higher education.	3.00	0.84	High Extent	2.95	0.86	Very High Extent
Institutional partnership will help in the developing open and distance learning in higher education.	2.70	0.81	High Extent	2.85	0.84	High Extent
Sharing of limited resources will help in the development of open and distance learning.	2.99	0.85	High Extent	3.05	0.80	Very High Extent

Utilization of expertise in partnership will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.	3.00	0.86	Very High Extent	2.90	0.87	High Extent
Grand Mean	2.94	0.83		2.90	0.85	

Source: Field Survey, 2020

The analysis in Table 3 shows that the respondents accepted the view that Sharing of educational facilities will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education. The analysis still reveals that the respondents accepted the point that Sharing of responsibilities among institutions will help in developing open and distance learning in higher education and that Institutional partnership will help in developing open and distance learning in higher education. It was also observed from the table that the respondents accepted the point that sharing of limited resources will help in the development of open and distance learning, also that utilization of expertise in partnership will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the opinion of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and National Open University staff on the role of institutional collaboration in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

Table 4: Z-test Analysis of Significant Difference between institutional collaboration and the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

Status	N	Mean \bar{X}	Standard Deviation	df	Std. Error	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
NOUNstaff	168	2.87	0.84	478	0.17	1.29	1.96	Accepted
IAUEstaff	312	2.89	0.84					

The analysis on Table 4 reveals that the z-cal of 0.17 is greater than the z-crit of 1.96. Therefore, the calculated z-ratio is not statistically significant at a 0.05 level of significance since it is smaller than the given critical value of z-ratio. So, the hypothesis 1 is thus accepted and the conclusion is that no significant difference in the opinion of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and National Open University staff on the role of institutional collaboration in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the opinion of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and National Open University staff on the role of institutional networking in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

Table 5: Z-test Analysis of Significant Difference Between institutional networking and the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

Status	N	Mean \bar{x}	Standard Deviation	Df	Std. Error	z-cal	z- crit	Decision
NOUNstaff	168	2.96	0.87	478	0.17	2.24	1.96	Accepted
IAUEstaff	312	3.06	0.87					

The analysis on Table 5 indicates that the z-cal of 0.17 is greater than the z-crit of 1.96. Therefore, the calculated z-ratio is not statistically significant at a 0.05 level of significance since it is greater than the given critical value of z-ratio. Therefore, the hypothesis 2 is thus accepted and the conclusion is that there is no significant difference in the opinion of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and National Open University staff on the role of institutional networking in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significance difference in the opinion of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and National Open University staff on institutional partnership and development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

Table 6: Z-test Analysis of Significant Difference between institutional partnership and development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

Status	N	Mean \bar{x}	Standard Deviation	Df	Std. Error	z-cal	z- crit	Decision
NOUNstaff	150	2.94	0.83	398	0.17	1.29	1.96	Accepted
IAUEstaff	250	2.90	0.85					

The analysis on Table 6 shows that the z-cal of 1.29 is greater than the z-crit of 1.96. Therefore, the calculated z-ratio is not statistically significant at a 0.05 level of significance since it is greater than the given critical value of z-ratio. Therefore, the hypothesis 3 is thus accepted and the conclusion is that there is no significance difference in the opinion of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and National Open University staff on institutional partnership and development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Based on the analysis of the data, the findings of the study revealed that institutional collaboration to a large extent will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State. This finding is in collaboration with Fay and Morrison (2007), who observed that maximum cooperation by institutions or universities will help in the development open and distance learning in higher education.

The study still showed that universities or institutions introducing institutional networking by providing e-learning programme will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education. This finding is in line with Nafukho (2007) and Wright (2006), who opined that government and institution should work together to develop e-learning programmes among the institutions and introduction of sustainable and accessible electrical and communications infrastructure to enhance the development of open and distance learning or education.

Finally, the finding of the study also indicated that if institutions or universities partnering together will help in the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State. This finding is in the same view with Coppola (2004), who noted that institutional partnership, sharing of education infrastructure and responsibility in higher education will lead to the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.

5. CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges described in the study, new institutions are launched each year, existing traditional institutions, are expanding their open learning options and enrolment in distance education courses continues in both the developed and developing worlds. The continued growth, development and success of distance and open education institutions will depend on the extent to which issues covered in this study are addressed, as they all affect the quality of the learning experience provided to students.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher made the following recommendations:

1. The institutions or universities through the government should introduce institutional collaboration that will allow institutions to cooperate in one way or the other to enhance development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.
2. Government should invest more in education to enable the institutions have the funds to introduce institutional networking that will promote e-learning programme to develop open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State.
3. Institutions or universities should share responsibilities and resources together for effective partnership for the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Rivers State and the society at large.

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