

# **Distance Education in Nigeria in the Age of Information and Communication Technology (ICT): A Critical Evaluation of the Prospects and Issues for Determination**

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## **Abstract :**

*This paper, while unarguably subscribing to the culture and practice of distance education as an integral part of any nation's education system and sustainable national development, is persuaded to the viewpoint that for Nigeria, and in fact any developing nation for that matter, to stand up and be reckoned with as having an efficient, effective and sustainable e-distance education, certain conditions must be satisfied. The conditions are summed up in the phrase: 'providing the enabling environment. This enabling environment, in its ramifications range from provision of electricity and telecommunications infrastructure to guarantee access and affordability. Addressing the foregoing in order to have an e-distance education that any reasonable man can attest to calls for some hard decisions which must bring about some changes on the political, economic and regulatory frameworks of the country.*

**Keywords -** Distance Education, Nigeria, Age of Information and Communication Technology (ICT),

## **I. Introduction**

Reason demand that in a discourse entitled as above, care should be taken to advance some guide to the construction of concepts and terminologies; at least contextually in order that meanings unintended should ab initio be denied any attempt or assumed right of importation. Accordingly, therefore, we would necessarily commence with providing answers to some preliminary questions deemed warranted consequent on the express use of some terminologies in the topic title; viz

- (a) What is Distance Education?
- (b) What promise of distance education has hitherto endeared it to its subscribers?

## **II. Distance Education: A Conceptual and Analytical Insight**

The phrasal term 'distance education' is not new in our education horizon. Its earliest development has been placed well in the late 19th century; and since then it has gone under various terms as correspondence education, correspondence college, distance learning and the likes (Arger, 2007). By whatever terminology so designated, distance education remains essentially a form and a method of orchestrating education delivery involving the teacher and the learner who are separated by time and space. It has rightly, therefore, been viewed as education organized and conducted using time-tested technologies capable of delivering education to students who are not physically 'on site' to receive it from their teachers (Wikipedia, 2014). While the late Sir Isaac Pitman championed and popularized distance education in Britain, the oldest distance education University is that of South Africa. It has been offering correspondence education to students since 1946 (Wikipedia, 2014).

In distance education, the teaching and learning encounter is orchestrated using such mass media technology as the post service which delivers all correspondence materials through the normal mail; the radio and television broadcasts which go to complement the correspondence materials, the audio and video tapes. These are the foremost and older media systems in vogue especially from the late 19th to the mid 20th centuries. While not altogether abandoning these older media designs, today's distance education proceeds using such modern systems as the computer networks and the CD-ROMS, the internet and its world wide web and video conferencing conducted over broadband. network connections; the pocket PC/mobile learning system which facilitates student's access to materials stored on a mobile device or through a wireless server all which have in no small measure extended and enhanced the education promise in distance education (EDEL, 2006).

Distance education holds attraction for a variety of subscribers. These include workers and non-workers alike. The latter category comprises people who for some obvious reasons could not access formal educational training but who are desirous of enrolment into the workforce of their country.

One of the sectors in developing economies, especially Nigeria that has suffered consequent on such adjustment programme and economic recession is education. The budget cuts relative to this sector have been predicated on the logic, a faulty one though, that it is a non-producing sector (Usun, 2004). Furthermore, since the 1990s, especially in developing countries, institutions have had to reckon with upsurge in schools enrolment demand. Correspondingly, governments have had to address the need to balance their education demand against fiscal realities (Schware, 2005). Accordingly, therefore, promotion of such policies as privatization, commercialization and deregulation and the likes, affecting all aspects of the economy, including, education and its distance form, has been in vogue since the 1980s. Distance education could well be, it is reasoned, a way out. In fact, a projection has been made in 2005 indicating that by the year 2015; e-learning will have become it global US\$150 billion industry (Schware, 2005).

### **III. Locating ICT within the Framework of Distance Education**

The central and strategic position and role that ICT both occupies and plays in development strategies of various economies has constituted it the cardinal tool of governments and organizations. It is now almost imperative for policy makers to focus on e-commerce, e-finance, e-government and e-education as catalysts for all sustainable development agenda. Yet, it seems in the assumption of this paper that ICT appears to have left its imprint more on education generally but particularly more so on distance education. This assertion is predicated on the fact that beside education being the father of all occupations, the education industry has witnessed the presence of ICT coursing through its tissues and sinews.

However, mindful of distance education as the pivot of this paper, its method of delivery has traversed several generations of technology in its history. Among the older forms of technology, (to some extent already alluded to) are the mail system, the audio tapes, radio and television broadcasts, videos, CD-ROMs and other forms of media storage format. These, no doubt, served that end to which they were pre-determined; some just efficiently, others more so. Distance education in today's information society and age makes use of such technologies like the World Wide Web, e-mail, computer-aided instruction, video-conferencing over broadband network connections for both wired physical locations and wireless mobile learning and the likes (Wikipedia, 2014). The internet, because of its ability to create and sustain a virtual community stretching from one end of the globe to the other, has been viewed as the latest major technology in distance education. Hence, in distance education, ICT is better understood as having to do with the application of digital equipment to every aspect of teaching and learning (EDEL, 2006). Commanding now a growing influence, it makes use of electronic computers and computer software to access, download, store, protect, process, treat, convert, transmit and retrieve information on all aspects of the education process.

### **IV. Summary and Conclusion**

Distance education, standing for both a form and method of education provisioning, has, from its inception, proceeded with a promise of creating and providing opportunity for high quality, cost effective education accessible to all. It has traversed and employed, in its history of existence, generations of technologies such as the mail system (correspondence), radio/television broadcasts (unair/poly-air), audio/video teleconferencing.

In contemporary times and with the advent of information and communication technology (ICT), as a common place tool of resort in distance education in developed countries, its suitability in distance education is no longer in issue but rather its adaptability and functionality in third world countries for the same purpose. The adoption and chances of functional ICT in the field of distance education in developing countries like Nigeria, and of course the dawning of distance education in such countries is fraught with fundamental problems; though not insurmountable. The problems range from the need for infrastructure and facilities such as electricity and the telecommunications for a roll out to access and affordability. A commitment, therefore, to towards the ramifications of these problems in order to usher in an efficient, effective and sustainable ICT -enabled distance education, calls for in the words of Arger (2007), a "process of fundamental, structural, politico-economic change, which goes far beyond mere educational reforms".

### **V. Recommendations**

Although, from the discourse one could deduce what is expected of the government and the individuals in this era of ICT and e-education.

The researchers are moved to make just one recommendation that the supply of computers and internet fees should be subsidized by the government to make it affordable to many who deserve it.

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