

The Role of Open and Distance Learning Institution in Providing Access to Learning Among Prison Inmates.

R. J. OGIDAN, National Open University of Nigeria.
ogidanrotimi@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT

Primarily, prisons are built as an institution to help control the rate of crime in the society and also reform the prisoners. In view of this, an investigation was carried out on how Open and Distance Learning institution like the National Open University of Nigeria can extend educational services that will provide access to learning among prison inmates. In most African countries, much has not been done to help prison inmates to acquire education beyond the primary and at most secondary school level. The study found out that arrangement that can be put in place to establish study centres as meeting points for the learners and their instructors in addition to the method of providing support services for the learners. Suitable learning facilities to be needed were identified and how they can be made available within the confines of the laws guiding prison services were stated. The advantages that can be derived when access to learning is provided to the prison inmates are stated in the paper. Suggestions are also made on the role of stakeholders like Open and Distance Learning institutions, the government, religious bodies, prison inmates' relations and other relevant organizations in meeting the financial needs of learner inmates during the course of their study.. Appropriate recommendations are made based on how prison inmates can maximize the advantages of gaining access to learning through the Open and Distance Learning.

Introduction

The rate at which ODL institutions are being established and recognized has immensely contributed to creating access to learning and by so doing helping to liberalize education throughout the world today. Democratic rule is taking firm root in the political dispensation the world over and Africa in particular. According to Ipaye (2007) this new trend in governance is probably responsible for the emerging civilized way of rulership which is inadvertently affecting the education industry. Attendant to this is a new spirit of embracing the rule of law in Nigeria. Greater attention is now being paid to the use of prison where many people who are acclaimed to have wronged the society are kept in custody so that there can be relative peace in the society in one way or another (Odekunle,1997).

In the Nigerian prisons, it is sad to state that the population of the inmates that are awaiting trial is greater than those that have been convicted and gaoled. According to Fadipe(2008),invariably the population of the prison inmates which is made up of people with ages between 24 and 54 in Nigeria becomes so large that it cannot be overlooked. As observed by (Fatinikun(2008),large population of prison inmates who are supposed to be in their active work years is capable of constituting a drag on economic growth in the society. There is, therefore, a serious problem if high rate of incarceration can constitute a drag in the economic growth of the nation.

Even if the major purpose of incarceration is to rid the society of crime, something must be done that will enable prison inmates to be useful after serving their terms. Following incarceration, the society should be able to make provision for the inmates so that after serving their term, their return to the society would contribute to building it rather than destroying it economically or otherwise. In order to help the inmates and the society, the prison authority would have to provide the opportunity for the inmates to acquire useful skills so that they would be able to fend for themselves particularly after serving their term. By this, they will not become a nuisance to the society. While the prison inmates are supposed to be securely kept or incarcerated as a punitive measure, they are also supposed to go through series of programmes for the sake of reformation

and rehabilitation. In line with this, the prison service in Nigeria is already taking them through a series of training in simple trades so that they would be able to practice some skills when they are eventually released. But Alemika (2007), noted that some of the training programmes do not take care of prisoners who are already skilled or literate before they were convicted. However, it can safely be argued that this set of inmates can still benefit from training programmes.

Statement of the Problem

Access to education for livelihood through the Open and Distance Learning is yet to be made available to the prison inmates. Majority of them therefore do not have access to education that could prepare them for life after prison. Following this, record has shown that most prison inmates after serving their term are unable to have a gainful employment (Fatinikun,2008). Invariably, they are unable to fend for themselves. Such a major lapse in the welfare of the prison inmates could therefore account for why most of the discharged prison inmates go back to crime and back to the prison, in which case, they have become a serious problem to the society. Similarly, the prison inmates constitute population of citizens who are in the active work stage of their life, they therefore cause a drag in the nation's economy. The society is yet to pay attention to how the prison inmates can be assisted to have access to education with the prime aim of acquiring useful skills for livelihood particularly through the Open and Distance Learning mode of instruction.

Purpose for Providing Prison Inmates with Access to Learning

The purpose of this paper therefore was to examine how the prison inmates can have access to education where they can acquire useful job skills that will enable them to be able to fend for themselves in the society after serving their prison terms. Statistics on prisons in Nigeria shows that there are 124 convict prisons, 83 satellite prisons, 37 state headquarters, 8 zonal offices, 124 training schools and one staff college. The 124 training schools include 10 farm centers. In all, there are about 47000 prison inmates in Nigeria (Fatinikun, 2008) There is however little or no plans to help open the windows of contemporary corrections through education as a way of enhancing the opportunity to respond to new challenges of preparing the prison inmates for becoming gainfully employed in the future . The issue of giving the prison inmates the opportunity of having access to learning through Open and Distance Learning is important because according to Ajibola (1990), most inmates were jobless before they got to the prison. This is also true of a report in Crowther (1969), where it is stated that, roughly half of all prisoners in the United States of America were unemployed at the time of their arrest. It was also noted that the average educational level of new prison inmate on admission to the prison is the 11th grade.

Definition of ODL

Open and Distance Learning is defined by the Commonwealth of Learning as a way of providing learning opportunities that is characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or both time and place (Jegade 2003).

Aim Of Open And Distance Learning

The Open and Distance Learning institutions aim at providing support and facilitate quality learning process in distance learners through interactive activities. According to Daniel (1992) Open and Distance Learning offers a number of advantages to learners one of which is to provide opportunities for learning

Advantage of Providing Prison Inmates with Access to Education

1. A major advantage of providing prison inmates with access to education is that it helps them to avoid future criminal behavior. It is certain that if they are able to gain access to education where they would acquire useful vocational skills and educational knowledge

- they would become refined and a new brand individual who may not be interested in crime again.
2. They would enjoy the privilege of having face to face interaction with psychological counsellors and benefit from other array of services that can assist the inmates to improve their self-concept.
 3. Access to education through the ODL would also assist in reintegrating the prisoner into the community. In work-release and study-release programmes, prisoners would have the opportunity to participate in work or educational activities outside the prison. According to Alemika(2008), as prisoners get close to their parole or release dates, some are permitted unescorted to visit their families on weekends. This arrangement coupled with educational knowledge they have acquired would help inmates to readjust to society after they have been released.

The social and academic structure of education can actually encourage rehabilitation and reintegration. For example, inmates acquire attitudes and knowledge from studies and interaction with support staff that may reduce their desire to engage in criminal behaviour but rather improve their social ,economic and academic skills.

Access to Learning in the National Open University of Nigeria

The Open and Distance Learning system generally provides opportunity for a life long learning as a philosophical concept in which learning is viewed as a long term process beginning at birth and lasting throughout life. According to Jegede (2005), it is a conceptual framework within which the learning needs of people of all ages at educational and occupational levels may be met, regardless of their circumstances. This means that prison inmates are in a category of people that can seek knowledge in ODL.

Generally, in Nigerian prisons, the inmates who show interest in University Education are assisted by having University Matriculation Examination arranged for them ,and if they are able to pass the examination, amnesty is usually arranged for them (Nigerian Punch ,2008).However in the National Open University of Nigeria, applicants do not need to take any aptitude test in whatever form which implies a true access rather than being pruned down from the population of intakes to be admitted In this case, the National Open University of Nigeria operates an open access mode of providing opportunity to everybody who is interested in education regardless of the distance, location, background or economic status of such an individual. This policy is also indicative of the fact that the interest of the prison inmates is included. Presently, the university has already commenced discussions with the prison authorities on how study centers would be created for students who are interested in its programmes. This is with a particular reference to the maximum, medium and minimum prisons and Ikoyi prison which are located in Lagos-Nigeria where already, some prison inmates are showing interest in ODL academic programmes.

In the National Open University of Nigeria, There are already 180 academic programmes and 1380 courses (Ipaye 2007) that are on offer in five schools and a centre that are listed below.

School of Arts and Social Sciences
 School of Business and Human Resources management
 School of Education
 School of Law
 School of Science and Technology
 Center for Continuing Education and Work-Place Training

Method of Course Delivery and Available Instructional Facilities

Some electronic methods of course delivery in the National Open University of Nigeria are telephone, teleconferencing, print materials, audio tapes, video tapes, CD-ROM, radio and television broad-casting.

Some facilities which are already in use that can be utilized to provide the prison inmates with access to education in the National Open University of Nigeria are:

1. Well equipped e-learning laboratory
2. Sixteen of its study centres linked with the Nigerian satellite
3. Computer laboratories equipped with between 30 to 50 computer units in each study.
4. Laboratories for science and workshop experience
5. Arrangement for the clinical experiences and supervision for nursing students
6. Virtual library

Mode of Applying For Admission in the National Open University of Nigeria

Application for admission is basically done on-line with clearly stated instructions which are displayed on the website of the University; www.nou.edu.ng. Though the admission requirement is a reflection of the nationally acceptable standard of five credits at two sittings, waiver consideration is also given to applicants who have deficiency in one subject area to offer access courses for two semesters that will eventually remediate student deficiency in admission requirement. There are also provisions for applicants who have about three credits to offer diploma courses while those who possess less number of credits can apply for certificate courses. Another category of applicants are those who do not have academic qualifications/paper for entry and are interested in seeking admission for a short time proficiency certificate courses.

All these admission arrangements are tended towards providing access to learning for anybody who desires it including the prison inmates. It is particularly very suitable for the prison inmates since they comprise a population that could be having diverse entry qualifications. Some of them may not even have started school before. However, the National Open University of Nigeria still has the facility and capacity to care for their needs.

Given the fundamental need of the prison inmates for education for livelihood, the Open and Distance Education is indeed, very strategic for them because of the following reasons:

1. It is liberal in terms of admission policy
2. It operates a flexible mode of instruction
3. It is computer mediated
4. It has on-line academic facilities
5. Many practical and short duration courses are on offer from which students can easily acquire skills, complete, graduate and be self sufficient.
6. Opportunities abound for them to enjoy series of support systems right in the prison while on course without falling foul of the law of the land .An example of such supports are, instructional facilitation, psychological support and other levels of guidance that are rendered through face to face mode of interaction.

Mode of Instruction

Learning is basically by self-instruction. This process involves the use of course materials which take learners step-by-step through an instructional process. It also involves self-assessment exercise which is a central feature. Some instructions can be paper-based or computer-based (Jege,2005)

Financial Cost

The cost of providing access to learning for the prison inmates at the National Open University of Nigeria is very bearable since the federal government has greatly subsidized the expenses in such a way that it would be easy for applicants to settle. Similarly, school fees are not paid ,all what students need to do is to pay for the study materials which they will use. The amount to be paid for any study material is also classified on the basis of credit load. This means that students

are expected to pay for the number of courses that they can afford at a time. However the implication is that students who are able to carry a full load and pass them would complete their programme faster than those who could not carry full load.

Some Available and Relevant Skill Acquisition Training Packages

National Open University of Nigeria also provides acquisition skills and training in small business entrepreneurial management and certificate courses in small scale business. The courses are specifically available in poultry, fish, farming, hair-dressing, telephone and hand set repairs. This will assist in the resettlement of prison inmates who have spent a good part of their lives working in an enclosed environment. The training curriculum can however be made to be more comprehensive so that inmate learners can benefit by being able to utilize such training outfit in ODL.

Learner Support Systems for the Prison Inmate Learners

Learner Support Services in the National Open University of Nigeria are aimed at helping the learners to do the following:

- a) Clarify their real needs and reconcile the conflicting demands of the society so as to come to terms with isolation and problems resulting from previous experiences
- b) Help learners to engage in Individualized services and so overcome the problems of system malfunctions
- c) Develop their own individual strategy for studying under a distance education system
- d) Overcome study and learning difficulties
- e) Overcome problem of interacting at a distance
- f) Overcome personal problems

The Advantages of Providing Access for the Inmate Learners

Prison inmates would be able to engage in vocations that will help them earn a living. It is therefore profitable if prison inmates are given access to learning by being trained to acquire useful vocational training in trades like carpentry, wood/cabinet management, iron works, farming, tailoring. There are other categories of prison inmates who could train to become lawyers, computer engineers, nurses and administrators. Everybody who has been able to acquire useful knowledge and procured certificates can depend on such skills to earn a living on leaving the prison and they will be comfortably adjust to life in a positive way.

Recommendation

The following provisions are recommend:

1. Government at various levels should pay close attention to prisoners' welfare as a measure of Human Rights enhancement on the continent.
2. Families of prison inmates should be incorporated into any programme of reform and reintegration.
3. Prison officers should be educated on Penal Code enforcement.
4. Government should sensitize prisoners to available academic opportunities through ODL.
5. Collaborative effort should be instituted between the public and private sectors to source and fund the education of prisoners.
6. All Open and Distance Learning institutions should further widen their scope to accommodate the peculiar educational needs of prisoners.
7. Government should reserve a certain percentage of employment positions for the educated and trained prisoners, this way, the private sector could be persuaded to do likewise.

Conclusion

Generally, happenings in the society today show that the need to seek the wellbeing of everybody is imperative for peace to reign in the society. A very important way to rid the society of crime is to provide prison inmates with access to learning particularly through the distance learning mode of instruction. The society cannot ignore this fact because contemporary developments in the world have shown that crime in our time has not only become more complex and global, but the criminals themselves have also become more innovative, unpredictable and sophisticated. There are therefore possibilities that when prison inmates are able to acquire education for livelihood, the rate of crime would reduce and society would be at peace where all would flourish and prosper.

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