Sociodemographics and Psychosocial Experience of Distance Learners in Nigeria: A Comparison of Single-Mode and Dual-Mode Universities

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Abstract

The study explored the psychosocial experience of distance learners at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and the Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) in Ile-Ife. Psychosocial experience refers to the aggregate outcome of events and feelings that define or affect a person's knowledge and perception of their prevailing social environment. The study adopted mixed-methods phenomenology research design. We deployed multiphase mixed-method sampling involving a quota sampling technique to select 182 respondents, and a purposive sampling technique to select eight interviewees selected from the initial respondents—four students from each of NOUN and OAU. Two researcher-designed instruments—a questionnaire and an in-depth interview guide—were deployed for data collection. The collected data were analysed with frequency counts, percentage analysis, and phenomenological analysis. Analysis of their sociodemographic characteristics showed that the profile of the students at the dual-mode university (OAU) reflects characteristics of conventional distance learners more than does the profile of the students at the single-mode university (NOUN). Distance learners at NOUN and OAU had both similar and different psychosocial experience. Their experience was largely positive—only 14% and 12.3% of NOUN and OAU students (respectively) had considered dropping out. Factors affecting learners' experience in both institutions included personal motivation, the flexibility and cost-effectiveness of distance learning, insufficiency of facilitator-led tutorials (at NOUN), and difficulties due to work and family responsibilities (at OAU). The study concluded that Nigerian distance learners possess the requisite psychosocial capacity to negotiate meaning and acquire knowledge in single-mode or dual-mode institutions.

Keywords: distance learners; characteristics; psychosocial experience; adult; Nigeria

Introduction

Globally and constantly, the evolution of distance learning and education has ridden on the back of the dialectical relationship of the challenges and opportunities of globalisation and technologies. Distance education, in the form of online education, will become mainstream by 2025, especially if parts of the globe provide enabling infrastructure and frameworks (Palvia et al., 2018). The recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic is testament that distance learning is inevitable.[1] From an institutional perspective, universities that were "prepared" had an easier transition to online mode during the lockdowns. As distance learning continues to gain wider usability, we must pay attention to learners' sociodemographic and psychosocial dynamics—

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[1] Data for this study were obtained before the COVID-19 pandemic and we did not give particular attention to the impact of the pandemic.

beyond the attention given to universities' technological and administrative readiness. These dynamics form an effective basis for planning and facilitating distance learning. In Nigeria, as in other countries, there is an increasing acceptance of distance learning as a major channel of widening access to higher education for the population of 200 million. This transition can be justified because distance education provides higher education opportunities to a vast and underprivileged population (Ajadi et al., 2008). In contrast, Gulati (2008) noted that despite the desirability of distance learning, poor and sociopolitically disadvantaged groups in developing countries face the massive challenge of access occasioned by limited infrastructural development.

Universities in the Nigerian system can be broadly categorised into three types based on ownership: those owned by the federal government, those owned by the 36 state governments (the country's federating units), and those owned by private institutions (including religious organisations) or individuals. In 2020, there were 172 universities in Nigeria, of which 44 were federal, 52 were state, and 99 were private (National Universities Commission [NUC], 2021). Apart from NOUN, only 12 of the universities have accredited distance learning sub-systems: nine of these belong to federal institutions, two to state institutions, and one to a private institution. Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife (OAU) is one of the nine federal universities that have accredited distance learning sub-systems. Although the Federal Government of Nigeria owned and financed both NOUN and OAU, the basic difference between NOUN and OAU is their characteristic nature as distance education institutions. The former, founded in 2002, is a single-mode institution while the latter, founded in 1962, is a dual-mode institution. The single-mode institution (also known as the Open University) is a dedicated distance teaching institution, while the dual-mode is an integrated model. The single- and dual-mode institutions are autonomous and mixed institutions, respectively. National Open University of Nigeria has become the country's largest university with 424,562 undergraduate students, while OAU is ranked 11th with 28,876 students (NUC, 2019). Learners at NOUN and OAU have the same socio-economic, sociopolitical, and socio-technological contexts. These contexts significantly affect the distance learners' psychosocial experience.

Although the Nigerian university system has undergone policy and structural developments, the percentage of unsuccessful admission seekers has continued to increase, corresponding to the nation's growing population. There is an admission crisis in Nigeria, and the traditional educational institutions and facilities do not cater for the enormous populace that needs higher education. According to Nigeria's Ministry of Education, over 700,000 candidates qualified for university entrance in 1999, but only 80,000 gained admission (Commonwealth of Learning [COL] International, 2001). Since 1999 the percentage of applicants admitted has been up to 50% (Ohioze et al., 2013), but in 2002/2003, the percentage of admissions was as low as 5.2% (51,843 of 994,381 applicants). In 2017, Nigerian universities had 1.7 million undergraduate students and 234,000 postgraduate students (Varrella, 2020b). National Open University of Nigeria has admitted that the university enrolment rate of about 1% of the estimated 200 million population is a crisis (Agency Report, 2020). These statistics indicate that many Nigerians who want to be at university lack the opportunity because of limited spaces in existing institutions. Distance learning is therefore gaining popularity.

Meanwhile, there is an erroneous perception of distance learning programmes as being at a lower standard than conventional university programmes. Distance learners will not always confidently declare they are distance learners. For instance, distance learning graduates cannot participate in the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme—a mandatory 1-year national service for all Nigerian college and university graduates who are under 30. This discrimination stems from a perception of distance learning as having "second-option status". Stakeholders at NOUN had to

appeal and protest until the national lawmakers removed the word "correspondence" from the Act that established the institution to allow NOUN's under-30 graduates to participate in the NYSC scheme, and for its law graduates to attend Law School, a victory secured in July 2017 (Baiyewu, 2017). However, distance education graduates from OAU and other institutions still cannot participate in the scheme. In addition, factors such as personal characteristics, the learners' coping capacities, the cost and stress of learning at distance, motivation for enrolment, family and work demands, and infrastructural deficit can affect the psychosocial experience of distance learners. Sociodemographic variables, including age, sex, occupational status, marital status, and educational trajectory are usually prominent in an analysis of the distance learner profile and the planning and facilitation of distance learning (Schneller & Holmberg, 2014; Arthur-Nyarko et al., 2017; Karpenko et al., 2017). Stoessel et al. (2015) found that sociodemographic characteristics significantly determine the attrition patterns in distance learning programmes.

Most studies of NOUN have focused on the challenges and prospects (Aboderin, 2015), the administrative problems (Obioha & Ndidi, 2011), and the use of technologies (Ambrose & Okpala, 2015; Nwana et al., 2017; Yakubu et al., 2019; Bubou & Job, 2020). Ohioze et al. (2013) and Kpolovie and Obilor (2014) have also appraised open learning in Nigeria by focusing on NOUN. Among the few studies on OAU are those of Akande and Sofowora (2011), which analysed the deployment of information communication technologies (ICT) by distance learners of the Bachelor of Education programme at OAU, and Adewale and Daramola (2013), which evaluated the opportunities and challenges of e-learning for distance learning at OAU. There is a need to further explore the phenomenon of distance learning in Nigeria, especially from the perspective of learners' psychosocial experiences. While research has focused on the institutional level of operations, learners' experience of the distance learning phenomenon also deserves attention. Comparing the psychosocial experiences of distance learners in single- and dual-mode institutions in Nigeria indicates the extent to which learners possess the requisite psychosocial capacity to acquire higher education at a distance. Hence this study.

The central research question of this study is: What is the psychosocial experience of distance learners in Nigeria? Thus, the specific objectives of the study are to:

1. determine the sociodemographic characteristics of distance learners in Nigeria
2. compare the psychosocial experience of distance learners at NOUN with those at OAU
3. examine the factors that affect the psychosocial experience of distance learners in Nigeria.

The following comparative study is significant because enrolment in single- and dual-mode distance learning institutions has become increasingly popular as a result of the admission crisis in Nigeria. This country of more than 200 million consists mainly of young people, most of whom are constrained in their ability to acquire higher education amidst multiple institutional and socio-economic challenges. Exploring the psychological experiences of distance learners is crucial in defining their characteristics and making adequate provision for distance. Psychosocial factors are pointers to how stakeholders (learners, facilitators, administrators, and policy makers) in the distance learning system should play their roles effectively. The present study helps to define the beneficiaries of distance education in Nigeria and provides evidence-based insights into understanding the psychology and social peculiarities of distance learners. Those findings are useful to stakeholders and contribute to the body of knowledge on distance learning and education.

In subsequent sections, we review the literature about sociodemographics and psychosocial experiences of distance learners, discuss socio-constructivism as the theoretical framework for the study, and explain the methodological decisions and procedures for the study. We then

present the results from the quantitative and qualitative analyses and discuss the comparative findings. In the last two sections, we state our conclusion, and provide suggestions for further studies.

Literature review

Learner-centeredness and self-directedness are central to distance learning, so understanding the characteristics of distance learners is imperative. Askov et al. (2003) asserted that students who study successfully at a distance need to possess certain characteristics. Studies in five European countries (i.e., Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, and the United Kingdom) have shown that distance learners in higher education have particular features and experience (Owusu-Boampong and Holmberg, 2015). In Australia, part-time and older students engage in distance learning (Latchen, 2018). Rizvi et al.'s (2019) study on United Kingdom distance learners emphasises the predictive power of sociodemographics in online learning. Indeed, whether the education is delivered in print, video, or online, all distance learning programmes put certain expectations on students. Adult learners have often been identified as the primary beneficiaries of distance education. They are often characterised by labels such as "working-class", "family responsibility", and "self-direction in learning". Schneller and Holmberg (2014, p. 13) found that "a typical distance education student is a person in the midst of life, with family, children and/or work responsibilities". As expected, modern distance learners have passed through primary and secondary education (at least) and have attained relevant skills for further (higher) education. Ideally, these include computer, self-management, interpersonal, and sequencing skills. Individual characteristics and skills combine with external contextual factors to form the psychosocial experience of distance learners.

Psychosocial experience refers to the aggregate outcome of events and feelings that define or affect a person's knowledge and perception of their prevailing social environment. Psychosocial experience combines personal and interpersonal factors. The personal–psychological dimension includes self-identity, purpose, self-confidence, and intrinsic motivation, while the interpersonal–social dimension includes relationships, extrinsic motivation, and societal context. Research has indicated that lack of interaction, negative perceptions, and dependence on conventional education could cause a low level of motivation and satisfaction among distance learners (Cakir et al., 2018). Psychosocial developmental factors are central to human development in general (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017) and students' wellness (Robino & Foster, 2018) in particular. Psychosocial experience of distance learners includes the personal knowledge and opinions that manifest in how the learners feel about, or perceive, distance learning. Their experience further manifests in their confidence, academic expectations, decision-making, disposition, and levels of satisfaction with phenomena in distance learning. In addition, the learners' personality, motivation, activities, and encounters that come up during interaction with co-learners and facilitators can inform their experience.

It should be noted that while certain characteristics are positive catalysts, some could hinder the success of distance learning. As indicated, distance learning students are likely to be self-motivated, be comfortable working independently, and possess strong study and organisational skills (Askov et al., 2003). However, they caution that not all adult learners possess these characteristics. Characteristics such as being female, migrant, and fully employed increase the probability of dropping out, and motivation such as intrinsic and extrinsic goal orientation, task value, control beliefs and self-efficacy (Bonito, 2013), increases some students' commitment to graduation (Stoessel et al., 2015). Also, distance education can be adapted to meet the needs of the community being served (Askov et al., 2003). That is, there is a need to assess the sociocultural and institutional contexts as well as the characteristics of the group of potential

learners to know what fits them best. The necessary adaptation of distance learning programmes to a certain group of people would make learning convenient and progressive. Adult learners deal with many challenging and complex issues (career, family, and work) simultaneously, and they undergo a variety of biological, psychological, and sociocultural developmental changes that can interfere with the learning process (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Thus, Cercone (2008) recommended that weaknesses and strengths of adults should both be considered when designing distance learning programmes. This suggests that how the peculiarities of adults are channelled could determine whether the characteristics are negative or positive. This study assumes that the sociodemographic characteristics of learners could have huge implications for their learning and the nation's distance education system.

To a great extent, the prevailing contextual factors in wider society determine or influence the attributes that characterise distance learners. These attributes include socio-cultural, economic, financial, educational, geographical, infrastructural, and technological factors. For example, learners enrol in an online programme for two reasons: the first is an employment option that includes getting a job and having job security; and the second borders on the convenience and flexibility of distance learning (Neighbors, 2004). Another factor could be encouragement from friends and families. (Social support for distance learners was further emphasised during the COVID-19 pandemic [UNESCO, 2020]). In addition, students enrol in online education for ease of financial stress and the proximity of a study centre. Distance learning democratises education and helps to overcome the challenges posed by geographic location, job status, or physical handicap (Al-Alawneh, 2013). These indicators suggest that personal and contextual factors affect how learners engage in distance learning.

Ajadi et al. (2008) summarised the prevailing context of distance learning and education in Nigeria thus:

> The social and economic dimensions of providing education for the population, within the context of prevailing national circumstances of dwindling financial and other resources in the face of developments needs [sic] are heavy. The ever-continuing growth in Nigeria's population, the attendant escalating demand for education at all levels, the difficulty of re-sourcing education through the traditional means of face-to-face classroom bound mode, and the compelling need to provide education for all (EFA) irrespective of environmental, social or cultural circumstances have meant that the country must of necessity find the appropriate and cost-effective means to respond adequately to the huge unmet demand for education. (Ajadi, 2001, p. 1)

Theoretical framework

This study hinges on socio-constructivism, which is an offshoot of constructivism. Constructivism holds that the individual produces meaning, and that meaning depends on the individual's previous and current knowledge structures and experience. Socio-constructivism posits that knowledge is produced when individuals interact socially in talk and activities about common problems or tasks. Lev Vygotsky defined the zone of proximal learning, or zone of proximal development (ZPD), as the process whereby learners solve problems beyond their present developmental capacity by collaborating with more capable colleagues (Oloyede et al., 2009). Adult teaching and learning is a process of negotiation involving the construction and exchange of personally relevant viable meanings (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). The implications of socio-constructivism for distance learning are observable in (1) the characteristics of the learner (a unique, self-motivated individual with a background and responsibility for learning); (2) the role of the instructor (a facilitator in a supportive learning environment who is involved in productive interactions between task, instructor, and the learner); and (3) the nature of the learning process (an active, collaborative, and social process) (Oloyede et al., 2009). The theory

aligns with the notion of self-direction because it emphasises the combined characteristics of active inquiry, independence, and individuality in a learning task (Merriam & Brockett, 2007).

A major criticism of socio-constructivism is that it is relativist, individualistic, and anti-realist (Walker, 2015; Noorsloos et al., 2017). Socio-constructivism not only emphasises individual and personalised learning—it also promotes collaborative learning and practice. Thus, socio-constructivism promotes social interactivity. In a way, the theory takes care of the anticipated sociological factors in the distance learning curriculum or programme. The educator sometimes sees the curriculum as "a selection from the culture" (Jarvis, 2004, p. 24). In fact, "perhaps the crucial idea in teaching and learning lies in 'relationship'" (Jarvis 2004, p. 199). Socio-constructivism dictates that social relationships and collaboration must happen for learning to occur. The facilitator must provide platforms for interaction among distance learners and between learners and facilitators. In summary, this theory is suitable for describing and drawing out the implications of distance learners' characteristics and their psychosocial experiences in Nigeria. Understanding the characteristics and experience of distance learners is the starting point for designing and facilitating effective distance learning programmes. Socio-constructivism explains how the distance learner, who is characterised by self-direction skills, negotiates the expression of their individuality and their interaction with others for effective learning.

Methodology

This section explains the research design, sampling procedure, research instruments, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

Research design

Convergent (QUAN+QUAL) mixed-method design—also known as triangulation design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007)—was deployed. This is the most traditional mixed-methods research design. The convergent design is used to collect complementary quantitative and qualitative data on the same topic to gain a maximal understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). We used this type of mixed methods approach to validate and expand the quantitative results with the qualitative data. Whereas the quantitative results tell us "if", the qualitative results tell us "how" or "why" (Terell, 2012). The study also adopted a phenomenological case-study research design. National Open University of Nigeria and OAU were used as case-study comparative units and a phenomenological analysis was used to probe the inner experience of the research subjects about the research question. As in Roberts' (2009) study, our socio-constructivist standing that learning is socially situated effectively aligns with the phenomenologist view that individual perspectives of lived experience evolve as people interact with their environment and social contexts. Overall, the research design enabled the researchers to pay attention to the participants' individual experience and context.

Study sample and sampling techniques

The study population consisted of distance learning students at NOUN and OAU. National Open University of Nigeria is the archetype of open and distance learning in Nigeria and has operated as a single-mode institution for 2 decades. As one of the nine federal public universities (out of the total of 12 universities) accredited to operate as dual-mode institutions, OAU adequately represents the national practice of distance learning in Nigeria. Because the research aims to compare the groups of learners, we attempted to have sufficient categories of distance learners from the single- and dual-mode institutions represented in the sample. The original sample for the study consisted of 200 respondents who were selected with a multilevel mixed-methods sampling strategy. However, only 182 of the sample provided survey responses that were adequate for analysis. Multiphase (post-stratification) mixed-methods sampling is a general

sampling strategy whereby different sampling techniques were used at different levels of the case study.

Phase I

A quota sampling technique was used to select 100 research subjects from each institution to obtain quantitative data for the study. This technique is an availability sampling (not a probability sampling), which allows for selecting a representative sample and the facilitation of sub-group analyses (Daniel, 2012). The initial 200-student sample was divided into four strata, two at NOUN and two at OAU. There was an allocation of 50 subjects for each stratum at NOUN. The strata were the Lagos Study Centre, Lagos State (NOUNLSC); and Osogbo Study Centre, Osun State (NOUNOSC). The two NOUN centres were selected for accessibility and because Lagos has a representative population of people living in Nigeria, while Osogbo is the capital of Osun State and is close to Ile-Ife where OAU is located. The strata used at OAU were the Centre for Distance Learning (OAUCDL) and the Institute of Education (OAUIED). The allocation for each stratum was 20 and 80 respectively. The Centre for Distance Learning and OAUIED were the two sub-systems in the institution that were responsible for different forms of distance education. The Centre for Distance Learning (the newer sub-system) catered for "online students" through a blended learning approach (face to face and online contacts) while OAUIED catered for "part-time students" through face-to-face contacts.

Phase II

To select the individual respondents in each stratum based on the quotas, we used the convenience sampling technique because of the difficulty associated with time limitations and accessing the roster or contact details of the distance learners in the institutions.

Phase III

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify eight participants from the 182 subjects who completed the questionnaire. Interviews were then conducted to obtain qualitative data . A purposive sub-sampling ensured that one male and one female student were selected in each of the four sample categories, giving a total of four students from each institution.

Research instruments

Two instruments—a questionnaire and an in-depth interview guide—were deployed for data collection. The instruments were developed based on a review of the literature (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Stoessel et al., 2015; Neighbors, 2004; Ajadi et al., 2008; Cercone, 2008; Al-Alawneh, 2013; Schneller & Holmberg, 2014; Mittelmeier et al., 2019; Rizvi et al., 2019). Each of the instruments contained an introductory paragraph that stated the purpose of the data collection, assured confidentiality in data management, and sought the respondents' permission. The questionnaire had two sections: Section A sought to elicit data on sociodemographic characteristics of the distance learners (see Table 2) and Section B contained 11 statements with a 5-level Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" to measure the learners' perception of their psychosocial experiences (see Table 3). The in-depth interview guide contained seven open-ended questions.

1. Why did you enrol in a distance learning university programme?
2. How would you describe the distance learning experience you have had so far?
3. What are you satisfied with and what not with regards to instructional activities and resources?
4. How would you describe the interaction between you and the facilitators?
5. How would you describe the interaction between you and other students?
6. What other factors do you think have positively or negatively affected your engagement in distance learning?

7. What specific practices would you like to see sustained and what specific changes would you like to see?

Due to difficulties regarding time limitation and accessibility of distance learners, and because this study did not focus on the generalisability of results, the instruments were not pilot tested. Rather, the usability (validity and reliability) of the instruments was determined through peer evaluation and triangulation. The peer evaluation was done by subjecting the instruments to correction by multiple researchers in educational sciences before they were administered. The researchers also compared the findings with the instruments. In line with the convergent mixed-methods design, triangulation was done by stratifying the sample and validating the quantitative data with the qualitative data.

Data collection and data analysis techniques

The quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently in the third quarter of 2017. One of the researchers administered most of the research instruments, with an ad hoc research assistant, on different days. Based on the earlier information from the administrative staff, we contacted students at NOUNLSC and NOUNOSC. In the same manner, OAUIED students were contacted at the OAU campus, but OAUCDL students were contacted via email and telephone (for the questionnaire and interviews, respectively) based on the details received from the centre. The face-to-face interviews took about 20 minutes each. They were recorded on a voice recorder and transcribed within a week. During the interviews and administration of the questionnaires, researchers and assistants were mindful of relevant ethical issues and dealt with them as necessary. For instance, in the preliminary stage of each interview session, the researchers introduced the purpose of the data collection and sought the participants' consent. In total, 182 copies of the questionnaire (93 from NOUN and 89 from OAU) were found to be adequate for analysis; other copies were hardly completed. Eight interview sessions were conducted as planned, with four students from NOUN and OAU.

The eight participants were coded as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Codes for interview participants in the study

S/N	Interview participant	Code
1	NOUN Lagos Study Centre Student 1	NOUN LSCS 1
2	NOUN Lagos Study Centre Student 2	NOUN LSCS 2
3	NOUN Osogbo Study Centre Student 1	NOUN OSCS 1
4	NOUN Osogbo Study Centre Student 2	NOUN OSCS 2
5	OAU Institute of Education Student 1	OAU IEDS 1
6	OAU Institute of Education Student 2	OAU IEDS 2
7	OAU Centre for Distance Learning Student 1	OAU CDLS 1
8	OAU Centre for Distance Learning Student 2	OAU CDLS 2

Source: Authors' fieldwork analysis

Deploying the SPSS software, the quantitative data were analysed using frequency counts and percentage analysis. The qualitative data were subjected to phenomenological analysis manually following these steps: (1) Epoche was set by declaring the socio-constructivist theoretical framework within which the study was situated (as shown in the literature review) and we discussed the findings later, in connection with the theory. (2) We did phenomenological reduction by categorising the most significant words, phrases, and statements from the interview transcripts into typical and atypical groupings. (3) Imaginative variation was achieved by describing the meaning constructed by the distance learners and then making meaning of the

themes that came up, interpreting the findings in connection with the theoretical framework and the literature. (4) In the conclusion, we synthesised the textual and structural themes and showed how they have affected the Nigerian distance learners' psychosocial experiences.

The quantitative and qualitative data were merged at the level of results presentation for corroborative interpretation.

Results

This section presents the findings from the descriptive analysis and phenomenological analysis.

Sociodemographic characteristics of distance learners in Nigeria

Table 2 presents responses relating to the sociodemographics of the NOUN and OAU distance learners. A total of 93 NOUN students' and 89 OAU students' responses were analysed. Analysis showed that the average ages of NOUN and OAU students were 26.2 and 31.8 respectively. The OAU students were generally older than their counterparts at NOUN. Students at OAU were mostly female while most of the NOUN students were male, and there were more married students at OAU than at NOUN. Most of the OAU students were parents, were employed, had educational qualifications higher than secondary-school certificates, and were self-sponsored. One of the "conventional distance learners" at OAU emphasised her characteristics thus: "It is not easy; I am just trying my best […] to cater for family, for babies and to go to work and add learning" (OAU IEDS 2). Conversely, most NOUN distance learners were sponsored by their parents or guardians.

Table 2 Sociodemographic characteristics of the student-respondents

S/ N	Items	Variables	NOUN		OAU	
		n: 182	F (93)	% (100)	F (89)	% (100)
1	Sex	Female	45	48.3	62	69.8
		Male	48	51.7	27	30.2
2	Age *NOUN Students' mean age: 26.2 OAU Students' mean age: 31.8*	16-25	56	60.4	14	15.9
		26-35	28	29.7	54	60.2
		36-45	4	4.4	16	18.2
		46-55	3	3.3	5	5.7
		56-65	2	2.2	-	-
3	Marital status	Single	74	79.6	51	57.0
		Married	19	20.4	38	43.0
4	Number of children	0	68	72.6	42	47.5
		1-2	15	16.1	26	28.8
		3-4	9	9.7	18	20.3
		5 and above	1	1.6	3	3.4
5	Employment status	Unemployed	40	43.0	10	11.2
		Self-employed	32	34.9	20	22.5
		Civil servant	4	4.7	26	29.2
		Private sector	16	17.4	33	37.1
6	Highest educational qualification	High School Certificate	32	34.9	2	2.2
		National Certificate in Education	3	3.5	54	61.0

		National Diploma	18	19.8	5	5.6
		Higher National Diploma	3	3.5	10	11.2
		Bachelor's Degree	21	22.1	10	11.2
		Master's Degree	11	11.6	2	2.2
		Other	4	4.7	6	6.7
8	Sponsor(s)	Self	36	38.7	68	76.4
		Employer	1	1.1	-	-
		Scholarship	-	-	1	1.1
		Spouse	4	4.3	3	3.4
		Parent(s)/Guardian	52	55.9	17	19.1
9	Physically challenged	Yes	1	1.1	1	1.1
		No	92	98.9	88	98.9

Source: Authors' field survey

The psychosocial experience of distance learners at NOUN and OAU

Analysis showed that the distance learners' psychosocial experience was more positive than negative in their distance learning endeavours. As indicated in Table 3, distance learners at NOUN (65.6%) and OAU (76.4 %) considered themselves fit for distance education, and only 14% and 12.3% respectively have considered dropping out of their programmes. Students in both institutions believed they were aware of what it takes to learn at a distance. Key phrases discovered in the data include "free will", "option", and "impact". The majority from both institutions on both sides considered distance education to be more cost-effective than conventional schooling and that they had cultivated the necessary distance learning skills. They had largely positive dispositions towards using technology for distance learning. Other examples of positive experience in both institutions bordered on healthy relationship between facilitators and learners, availability of facilitation resources, coping ability and good academic performance, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness of distance education. As expressed by a NOUN student, distance learning "is easy and it saves time . . . saves my time a lot" (NOUN OSCS 1). Students in both institutions confirmed that their lecturers regarded them as mature, adult students. One student said that their lecturers "do consider us in the sense that there are some regards they give us and there are some ways they treat us . . . that even gladdens our hearts" (OAU IEDS 1).

Table 3 Students' responses on the psychosocial experience of distance learners in NOUN and OAU

SN	Items	Inst.	SD	D	I	A	SA
1	Distance learning is for certain kinds of people, and I am fit for it.	NOUN	17 18.3%	9 9.7%	6 6.4%	37 39.8%	24 25.8%
		OAU	9 10.1%	9 10.1%	3 3.3%	38 42.7%	30 33.7%
2	My programme/course of study is credible and equivalent to the one offered in full-time studies.	NOUN	1 1.1%	4 4.4%	5 5.4%	39 41.9%	44 47.3%
		OAU	1 1.1%	4 4.5%	2 2.2%	35 39.3%	47 52.8%
3	I am not confident to disclose that I am into the distance learning programme.	NOUN	42 45.2%	24 25.8%	8 8.7%	9 9.7%	10 10.8
		OAU	42 47.2%	23 25.8%	3 3.4%	11 12.4%	10 11.2%

#	Statement						
4	Distance learning programmes are more cost-effective than the programmes in conventional universities.	NOUN	15 16.1%	15 16.1%	10 10.8%	27 29%	26 28%
		OAU	5 5.6%	12 13.5%	8 9.0%	30 33.7%	34 38.2%
5	If I had the opportunity I would attend/switch to full-time studies.	NOUN	15 16.1%	16 17.2%	21 22.6%	20 21.5%	21 22.6%
		OAU	13 14.6%	22 24.7%	4 4.5%	29 32.6%	21 23.6%
6	I enjoy studying with gadgets such as Android/Windows phone, iPad, iPhone, laptop, desktop computer, etc.	NOUN	2 2.2%	8 8.6%	10 10.8%	42 45.2%	31 33.3%
		OAU	8 9.0%	14 15.7%	10 11.2%	32 36.0%	25 28.1%
7	I do all kinds of online registrations, payments, and other processes by myself.	NOUN	2 2.2%	1 1.1%	8 8.6%	36 38.7%	46 49.5%
		OAU	6 6.7%	16 18.0%	7 7.8%	34 38.2%	26 29.2%
8	I have developed distance learning skills such as self-management, time management, and the use of a library/resource centre.	NOUN	2 2.2%	4 4.3%	8 8.6%	42 45.2%	37 39.8%
		OAU	3 3.4%	4 4.5%	5 5.6%	49 55.1%	28 31.5%
9	I have considered (or I am presently considering) dropping out of the programme.	NOUN	53 57%	21 22.6%	6 6.5%	6 6.5%	7 7.5%
		OAU	54 60.7%	20 22.5%	4 4.4%	1 1.1%	10 11.2%
10	I am not satisfied with the limited contact (physical and virtual) I have with my facilitators.	NOUN	19 20.4%	12 12.9%	14 15.1%	24 25.8%	24 25.8%
		OAU	16 18.0%	24 27.0%	11 12.3%	30 33.7%	8 9.0%
11	I am not satisfied with the limited contact (physical and via ICTs) I have with my co-students.	NOUN	21 22.6%	19 20.4%	19 20.4%	17 18.3%	17 18.3%
		OAU	14 15.7%	27 30.3%	12 13.5%	24 27.0%	12 13.5%

Source: Authors' field survey

Meanwhile, distance learners in the single-mode university (51.6%) and some in the dual-mode university (42.7%) wanted to have more contact (physical and/or virtual) with their facilitators. However, only 36.6% at NOUN and 40.5% at OAU would like to increase contact with their colleagues. Students at NOUN had more opportunities to interact among themselves than their counterparts at OAU because they could meet frequently at study centres. The researcher observed this during the fieldwork. For instance, although the NOUN students reported that their facilitators did not come regularly, they did hold peer tutorials. Unlike NOUN, OAU had no study centres beyond the campus. This limited the frequency of physical meetings among the students, and the nature of the country's roads meant that travelling long distances was financially demanding and stressful. Sometimes it was demanding and frustrating (e.g., taking "leave from work to travel to Ife to go and write the exam . . . It doesn't make sense" (OAU CDLS 2). Also, when referring to the relocation of their study centre, NOUN LSCS 1 lamented that, "taking permission from my place of work to go to my study centre is always a challenge". Similarly, OAU CDL students' complaints about the inconvenience and cost of travelling were connected to the fact that the sub-system was initially planned to be in the form of online education. When referring to the school's online distance learning sub-system as relatively new, OAU CDLS 2 stated, "there are definitely some challenges we've been having". At OAU,

students complained that, contrary to the original programme design, facilitators usually held classes during weekdays and such classes clashed with their working hours. According to one of the students, "We now told the woman that in the [application] form . . . what they wrote there was 'designated weekends'. That's why most of us collected the form" (OAU IEDS 2). Students see this as inconsiderate and potentially having negative implications for their academic performance and other responsibilities: ". . . we should not run any programme that would affect our work" (OAU IEDS 2). Students at OAU also complained that "the calendar changes often" (OAU CDLS 1).

In summary, the phenomenological analysis of the qualitative data showed that the NOUN students were self-motivated and their reasons for enrolment largely constituted the positivity of their experience, but their negative experiences related to institutional/operational and societal challenges and barriers. At OAU, students' motivation was the same as that for full-time students (they wanted to learn and achieve as much as the full-time students at OAU) but their negative experience related to the operationalisation of distance education in the institution and wider socio-economic contexts. Atypical findings also indicated that some learners at NOUN would prefer to enrol in full-time programmes, although they were not less active and positive about distance learning. Atypical responses from OAU students were the emphasis on the peculiar difficulties associated with distance learning and how the challenges frustrated them.

Factors that affect the psychosocial experiences of distance learners in Nigeria

The challenges that confronted the learners are apparent above. Analysis showed that factors that shape the psychosocial experiences of the students include: (1) motivation for enrolment; (2) opportunities to socialise (more available at NOUN); (3) stress and cost of travelling (especially at OAU); (4) inadequacy of resources (especially as it relates to insufficient lecture rooms for OAUIED students and issues with audio-visual materials for OAUCDL students); (5) level of flexibility and cost-effectiveness (pronounced at NOUN); (6) difficulties because of work and family responsibilities (especially at OAU); (7) unstable calendar and timetable (especially at OAU); (8) healthy but a limited facilitator–learner relationship in both institutions. Narrations of the NOUN participants showed that they were self-motivated and were enrolled in distance learning for a variety of reasons, which largely constituted the positivity of their experience. The main reason the students in both NOUN and OAU chose to study by distance was the flexibility it offered for them to combine work and study. Specifically, at OAU, there were several reasons for individuals opting for distance learning. The OAU students constantly referred to what was available in the full-time system and said that they expected to achieve education of similar quality. Flexibility was linked to the need and ability to "to sponsor myself" (OAU IEDS 2). One OAU student emphasised that "'convenience' is the key point; it's the very reason I applied" (OAU CDLS 1). This student also understood convenience to mean the opportunity for self-sponsorship, and connected it with their employment status. Meanwhile, flexibility in relation to combining studies and family responsibilities was not pronounced among NOUN students. However, negative psychosocial experiences of the Nigerian distance learners related to the operational, institutional, and societal challenges and barriers. Words such as "hitches", "facilitation", "economic" and "technological" surfaced in the analysis of the students' negative situations. Inadequate facilities (including lack of computers, poor internet connectivity, and insufficient instructional materials), expensive school fees, and pay-per-semester arrangements were sources of stress. But despite challenges, they were well motivated: "If I don't want to consider the certificate and the motive I have behind schooling, I would have even quit" (OAU IEDS 1). Negative experiences of OAU distance learners related to the frustration associated with the dual-mode distance teaching institution and to the socio-economic contexts in the country.

Discussion

The basic sociodemographic features relating to gender, age, marital status, and employment status show that the profile of distance students at OAU—more than that of NOUN students—is aligned with previous findings (Cercone, 2008; Schneller & Holmberg, 2014). That is, OAU students tend to be typical distance learners. When viewed from the perspective of various parameters for determining who an adult is (such as those set out by Oyedeji, 1988; Merriam & Brocket, 2007), these features indicate that OAU distance learners are "more adult" than their counterparts at NOUN. This signals that the OAU students are individuals with responsibilities that characterise adulthood. Typical distance learners are often characterised by work and family responsibilities and self-directed learning (Schneller & Homberg, 2014

These learners are motivated by the convenience and flexibility of distance learning to manage their learning and employment. Learners at the dual-mode university also had to consider their family responsibilities (Neighbors, 2004). The basic sociodemographics of students at NOUN clearly show that, in recent times, individuals seeking to gain admission to NOUN are not only those seeking the opportunity to "work and learn" (which is the motto of the Open University) but also those who see NOUN as a viable alternative to conventional universities. This trend is because NOUN has rapidly become Nigeria's largest university (Varrella, 2020a; NUC, 2019). This aligns with trends in the United States: "Postsecondary enrolments are rising, and it is clear the growth is online" (Bronack et al., 2006, p. 219). More high school graduates now enrol in the university because of the difficulties associated with the processes to gain admission to conventional universities.

These findings suggest that distance learners in Nigeria are heterogeneous groups of people at different stages of psychosocial development. These patterns of sociodemographics could predict the learners' disposition to their academic endeavours and commitment to graduation (Rizvi et al., 2019). The results equally relate to Mittelmeier et al.'s (2019) findings that demographic variables and access to resources determine distance learning experience. Within the perspective of socio-constructivism, the distance learner is a unique, self-motivated individual with appreciable initial educational background and responsibility for learning. The learner can construct knowledge: "as individuals bring different background knowledge, experience, and interests to the learning situation, they make unique connections in building their knowledge" (Tam, 2000, p. 57). The varying sociodemographic dynamics might also enrich collaboration in the learning process. Stakeholders in distance learning institutions have a responsibility to pay attention to the shifting demographics and instructional design that would appeal to people who would traditionally be profiled as distance learners—and those in the emerging category. In line with the characteristic autonomy in distance learning and the principle of socio-constructivism, the learner should actively participate in determining the learning goals, strategies, and methods of learning (Tam, 2000; Bronack et al., 2006). Self-directedness is associated with adult learning, but the likelihood of attrition is higher among female distance learners and those who are fully employed. Therefore, no feature of the distance learners in this study could be strictly identified as positive or negative. The characteristics are neutral variables that could enhance or limit distance learning.

Socio-constructivist tenets dictate that facilitators of distance learning are responsible for supporting the learner to interact with the environment to acquire knowledge within an active, collaborative, and social process (Oloyede et al., 2009). The implication here is that, despite the autonomous nature of distance learning, the learner does not interact with objects alone. According to the Vygotskian framework, interaction with communities of learners and facilitators is foundational and occurs before learning at an individual level. Positive experiences of NOUN and OAU students, including their satisfaction with their contact with colleagues, provide a basis for effective social meaning-making. This experience boosts the learners'

readiness, predicts their wellness, determines the level of motivation, and affects their academic performances (Lupton, 2007; Mason et al., 2010; Oladejo, 2010; Robino & Foster, 2018; Cakir et al., 2018). A student's inability to interact with other students as much as they would like might have negative implications for their learning process. There could be a range of explanations for why most students at NOUN and OAU did not indicate the need to have more contact with their colleagues. At NOUN, the study centres offered an opportunity to regularly reinforce virtual meetings. At OAU, the learners, being typical distance learners, had come to terms with the fact that limited contact with facilitators and classmates is a characteristic of distance learning.

Another aspect of the social environment in socio-constructivist distance learning is the facilitator–learner relationship. Results indicate that a significant number of learners from the two institutions expected more from the facilitators. These results align with the findings of Vayre and Vonthron (2016), where social support provided by teachers was the only interpersonal factor that influenced students' engagement among teachers, peers, and family members. Improvement sought by the learners relates to patterns of academic activities. For instance, the students in the single-mode institution were bothered by the unavailability, insufficiency, and unpunctuality of lecturers. The students in the dual-mode institution were challenged with incongruent communications regarding the details of instructional interaction. A most probable explanation for the challenge at NOUN is that most of the facilitators are lecturers that are employed in conventional universities on full-time contracts. Some feel that these lecturers are already over-burdened at their primary workplace. Moreover, OAU students revealed that the financial implication of travelling from their residences to the university is huge. This affects their academic performance as they tend to miss most of the lectures scheduled during the week.

The most effective approach for increasing the social nature of learning in this age is the optimal deployment of asynchronous communication technologies in institutions. A positive disposition to the technology among Nigerian distance learners is essential because the ability to use ICT is fundamental to distance learning in the 21st century. The disposition helps learners develop digital skills as the need arises. Technology is central to socio-constructivist instructional design for distance learning (Tam, 2000). However, challenges in the wider context limit an institution's implementation of distance learning initiatives. For instance, the OAUCDL initially planned to run fully online degree programmes but after academic activities started (in the 2013/2014 session), NUC rejected online degree programmes in Nigeria (Mohammed, 2015). The Centre for Distance Learning settled for a 70:30 blended learning formula, where at least 30% of the academic activities must be face to face. The country still lacks adequate infrastructure to conduct virtual education. An irredeemable loss of one academic session at OAU and other universities (mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic) also exposed the country's lagging transition into modern distance learning. Another factor that disrupts academic schedules in Nigeria is industrial action (strikes) of university workers' unions caused by several factors. These are examples of how prevailing macro-level policies and situations affect distance learning systems at micro and meso levels (Ajadi et al., 2008). Furthermore, motivational factors as a component of psychosocial experience show not only that psychosocial factors affect motivation, but also that motivational factors affect (positively) learners' psychosocial experiences. Thus, motivation and psychosocial factors in distance learning have a reciprocal relationship. This observation aligns with findings from recent studies (Cakir et al., 2018; Kara, 2021).

Conclusion

Analysis of basic socio-demographics showed that NOUN students are mostly unconventional distance learners, while OAU students are typically conventional distance learners with attendance characteristics. Open University students are perceived to have few responsibilities. Some of them enrolled at NOUN under their parents' instruction and sponsorship, demonstrating

that NOUN has become a reliable alternative to conventional full-time universities amidst the admission crisis. Distance learning institutions, particularly NOUN, are solving social and educational problems by providing access and opportunities. The single-mode institution absorbs qualified candidates (especially youths) who would not otherwise secure prompt access to higher education. The characteristic features of distance learners at OAU suggest that older working adults are more likely to attend dual-mode institutions. This phenomenon emphasises that leaders and facilitators of distance learning should possess some knowledge and skills in adult education and lifelong learning.

Distance learners at NOUN and OAU had similar as well as unique psychosocial experiences. Their experience was largely positive. Despite challenges, they were well motivated. Factors such as personal motivation, more opportunities to socialise, healthy facilitator–learner relationships, flexibility and the cost-effectiveness of distance learning, and irregularity or insufficiency of facilitator-led tutorials influenced NOUN students' psychosocial experience. The OAU psychosocial experience of OAU students includes personal motivation, fewer opportunities to socialise, healthy facilitator–learner relationships, flexibility and cost-effectiveness of distance learning, difficulties arising from work and family responsibilities, and costs and risks of travelling. The overall positivity observed among the learners shows that Nigerian distance learners have the necessary psychosocial capacity to negotiate meaning and acquire knowledge—whether in single-mode or dual-mode institutions. Their negative experience included unpunctuality and insufficiency of facilitators (especially at NOUN), lack of adherence to academic calendars and schedules (especially at OAU), inadequate facilities, and risk and cost of travelling (at OAU only). For both sets of students, negative experience and dissatisfaction related to institutional barriers and the socio-economic and infrastructural challenges evident in the wider society—although these might be aggravated or ameliorated by the individual learner's socio-economic status. Poor road networks, erratic electricity power supply, and weak (and expensive) internet infrastructures in the country challenge and limit educational activities and contribute to the negativity. These findings emphasise that distance learners are not necessarily independent students who only want to learn on their own. Distance learners are not just self-directed; they are also interdependent. This finding is in line with the principle of socio-constructivism; the learners need to maintain a level of interaction among themselves and with their facilitators. Also, for the learners' self-directedness to be productive, it must align with the institution's administration and planning responsibilities.

Recommendations

This study has provided unique empirical insights to better understand the phenomenon of distance learning and the practice of distance education in Nigeria by comparing the Open University (NOUN) with a dual-mode institution (OAU). It has documented evidence-based information on the distance learners' sociodemographic features and psychosocial experiences in the two institutions. The information would be useful for stakeholders, including academics, researchers, educators, and policymakers. However, this study did not assess the learners' academic performances. There is a gap for further evaluative enquiries into the comparative effectiveness of distance education in open universities and dual-mode universities. To better enhance the theory and practice of distance education in Nigeria, further studies should compare the experience of distance learners in Nigeria with the experience of their counterparts in other countries. Also, our methodological approach did not use probability sampling; future research could use quantitative methods to test hypothetical relationships among variables that relate to the issue of Nigerian distance learners' psychosocial experiences.

Based on the findings of the study, we make the following recommendations.

1. Distance learning institutions that use a socio-constructivist approach should examine their students' psychosocial potentialities at the start of programmes, and use orientation initiatives to make up for their deficiencies where necessary and possible. The responsibilities of learners and facilitators and the patterns of interactions in the community of learning should be described and clarified at the orientation stage.
2. The Open University (originally founded for workers) should be further strengthened to cater for its youthful student population. For instance, study centres should be equipped and designed to accommodate more willing and ready students to spend more time with their colleagues (and facilitators).
3. The leadership of distance learning institutions, relevant regulatory bodies, and policymakers should ensure that institutions work at ameliorating negative psychosocial experiences that are peculiar to their respective learners—such as irregularity/insufficiency of facilitator-led tutorials at NOUN and difficulties due to work and family responsibilities, as well as costs and risks of travelling in the case of OAU.
4. There should be a provision for policy, funding, and other resources necessary for developing social and technological infrastructures that would enhance the accessibility and delivery of distance learning in Nigeria.

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