



Administrators' competences and management of open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers State

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Abstract

This study investigated the administrators' competences and management of open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers State. The study adopted correlational survey design. Population of the study consisted of five hundred (500) administrators in public Universities in Rivers State with sample size of 150 which is 30% of the total population. The instrument used for data collection was questionnaire titled "Administrators' Competencies and Management of Open and Distance Learning Scale (ACMODLS)". It was validated by experts in measurement and evaluation in the Department of Guidance and Counseling. The reliability coefficient of 0.81 was obtained using Cronbach Alpha using which showed that the instrument was reliable. Pearson Product Moment correlation was adopted in analyzing the research questions with criterion mean of 2.5. The hypothesis was tested using t-test statistics at 0.05 level of significant. This study concluded that administrator's competences provides for the impartation of authentic knowledge and vital practices that standardizes the learning programme; and that management ensures the combination of communication and technology tools, integrated involvement of all stakeholders and effective planning to actualize successful implementation of the open and distance learning programme in public universities.

Keywords: administrators', competences, management, open and distance learning

Introduction

Over the years educational psychologists have argued that any activity which leads to a change in our behaviour is learning. Learning can be formal or informal. We don't just learn knowledge and facts; we also learn skills and attitudes. People learn in different ways and different learning styles have been identified. Learning can be superficial or deep. Motivation is important for learning and learning continues throughout a person's lifetime.

The need to clarify common terms used to describe distance learning becomes important in order to give direction to discussion of its implementation in Nigeria. Several terms are used interchangeably to refer to distance education. These terms include distance education, distance teaching, correspondence study education, home study, external study and independent study. The compound concept distance education subsumes other terms as most of the terms merely address specific aspect of distance education (Keegan, 1996) ^[9]. Distance learning is used as a term to describe the student-centeredness of distance education and it deals with the use of print and electric technologies to present individual lessons to learners at a distance. Its main characteristic is that it relies on noncontiguous, i.e. mediated communication. Therefore, distance education means the delivery of useful learning opportunities at convenient place and time for learners, irrespective of the institution providing the learning opportunity. Generally, distance education has four major characteristics as identified by ADEA Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning (2002) ^[1]. These characteristics are: institutional accreditation where learning is certified by an institution or agency; use of variety of media for instructional delivery; provision of two-way communication to ensure tutor-learner, and learner-learner interaction; and possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials for learner-learner interaction, laboratory or

practice session or library study. Distance education not only shares the goals of conventional education, but it also aims at providing access to historically under-served, place bound, and highly motivated population. Distance education is said to be open because of students' freedom and programme flexibility. It is flexible that open in terms of its admission requirements, that is, not as rigid as in conventional institutions, freedom in terms of place of study, time, place, and composition of study programme, content and didactic approach. It is intended to offer useful learning opportunity to recipients at a time and local environment convenient to them. Contacts between the student and institutions are provided through interactive and non-interactive media. It may also be provided through some contact at study centre. Unlike the conventional face-to-face instruction, the delivery medium plays a crucial role in minimizing the gap between teaching and learning (Keegan, 1996) ^[9].

The selection and training of good administrators is widely recognized as one of an industry's most pressing problems, there is surprisingly little agreement among executives or educators on what makes a good administrator. The executive development programs of some of the nation's leading corporations and colleges reflect a tremendous variation in objectives. An administrator can also be referred to as a manager, director, managing director, executive, chief executive, controller, chair, chairperson, head, boss, chief, principal, etc. Administrators support the smooth running of offices by carrying out clerical tasks and projects. An administrator in the construction industry could be involved organizing project meetings, typing up documents, responding to business enquiries, drawing up contracts and providing customer service.

Management is simply an organizational process that includes strategic planning, setting objectives, managing resources, deploying the human and financial assets needed to achieve objectives and measuring results. Management is the process by which a cooperative group directs actions towards a common goal. It is the process of harnessing the human and material resources in a particular system for the achievement of identified objectives in the system (Igbinedion, 2018) ^[7]. Management is an act of managing people, their work in order to achieve a common goal using the available resources. For better workflow needs a suitable environment. This creates opportunity as a result the subordinates working together with the manager to do the work together to reach the objective. They use their talent and skills to complete organizational tasks. Management consists of features such as functional initiative, activity, documental discipline, systematic process, and much more. A systematic process of administering is the administration. Postulated by Luther Gulick and Lyndall Urwick in 1937, POSDCORB is the primary function of administration. Within the management of the organization functions, the administration lays down the fundamental framework of an organization. POSDCORB stands for Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Coordinating, Reporting and Budgeting.

Ambiguity model of educational management can be adopted by educational administrators and managers of open distance learning. Bush (2011) ^[5] presented ambiguity model as the educational management model in his classification which stresses in turbulence, confusion, instability and complexity of organizational life, loose coupling within the groups, uncertainty and unpredictability, sensitivity to the signals emanated from the external environment, emphasis on

decentralization, lack of clarity of organizational objectives and low level of appreciation of processes due to the problematic technology utilized within the organization and a fluid participation of members in decision making process. The most appropriate leadership style aligned to ambiguity model of educational management to be employed by administrators and managers of open and distance learning would be the contingency model of leadership because this leadership style primarily stresses the advantages of adapting leadership styles to the specific situations by assessing the situations as well as reacting appropriately to them rather than applying one style to diverse situations.

It is important to note that open and distance learning programme is a highly complex, unpredictable and sensitive learning programme that can only be successful if administrative styles of leadership are adapted to the peculiarities of the programme. In support of exerting contingent approach to setting and situations argued that the administrative jobs are so complicated, instable and unpredictable to be dependent on predefined standardized responses to events and effectual administrators are permanently analyzing situation for evaluating how to change their behaviours based on them.

Another learning approach to consider regarding open and distant learning is the Experiential learning theories which sees experience at the core of the learning process. They aim to understand the manners in which experiences, whether first or second hand, motivate learners and promote their learning. Therefore, learning is about meaningful experiences in everyday life that lead to a change in an individual's knowledge and behaviours. Carl Rogers is an influential proponent of these theories, suggesting that experiential learning is "self-initiated learning" as people have a natural inclination to learn; and that they learn when they are fully involved in the learning process. Rogers put forward the following insight: (1) "learning can only be facilitated: we cannot teach another person directly", (2) "learners become more rigid under threat", (3) "significant learning occurs in an environment where threat to the learner is reduced to a minimum", (4) "learning is most likely to occur and to last when it is self-initiated". He supports a dynamic, continuous process of change where new learning results in and affects learning environments. This dynamic process of change is often considered in literatures on organizational learning because when the demands for accessing information more closely match the methods used to elaborate or learn the information, more is remembered.

Open and distance learning is an offshoot of the continuous process of change in the educational sector. There is a daily expansion in the enrolment of students in schools, growing needs of youths in Nigeria, the continual unrest in schools and the repeated changes in the educational system (Biolu-Steve, *et al.*, 2017) ^[4]. As a result of this unending change, administrators must therefore tailor learning content and experiences towards being self-initiated, with emphasis on experience at the core of the learning process. The importance of open and distance learning is reflected in the vast amount of related research It is now empirical that administrators' competences and effective management can foster open and distance learning programmes not only in Rivers state or Nigeria but across the globe as well.

This led the researcher to investigate administrators' competences and management of open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state.

Cited by Peretomode (2003) ^[13] identified three basic skills upon which, in his opinion, effective performance and consequently, successful administration rest. These skills are actually quite interdependent though they are often treated separately for pure analytical purposes. The basic skills are identified as communication and technical skills.

Communication skill remains a veritable tool in the hands of principals for administrative effectiveness to be achieved. Communication however is a two traffic flow where information is sent across to someone requiring necessary actions to be taken. The action in tone sends a signal to the sender that communication had taken place. It becomes communication only and only if a feedback is gotten from the receiver to the sender. Communication therefore is an act of transmitting information in verbal or written form (Nwafor & Nwogu, 2014) ^[10]. The act in the definition described the method and /or means through which the information was passed across. The verbal nature of information may mean a lot and sometimes misunderstood because of the loads attached to the act. Communication may also be expressed in the form of body language where such means of communication existed in the school system. All information carries instruction/information and such instruction information is what the principals expected the subordinate to act upon. The other form of communication as contained in the definition above is the written aspect of communication. Written form of communication may look a lot easier because it is the visible form of communication. The only barrier to this aspect of communication is a situation where the sentence structure is beyond the level of the receiver. Where this is possible the information becomes incomprehensible for the receiver and as such feedback will not be received.

The heart of every formal functional organization is centered on the effectiveness of the communication skill of the principal. Communication is made up five different levels namely: Downward, Upward, Lateral, Diagonal and External.

1. **Downward flow of Communication:** this is communication that flows from higher level to a lower level in an organization, like communication from superiors to subordinates. This form of communication is used by management for the following purposes:
 - Providing feedback on workers' performance.
 - Giving job instructions
 - Communicating the organization's mission and vision to employees
 - Highlighting the areas of attention.
2. **Upward flow of Communication:** this applies to communication that flows to a higher level in an organization to those at the lower levels in the same organization. It provides feedback on how well the organization is functioning. The subordinates use mode of communication to convey their problems and performances to their superior. Upward communication leads to more committed and loyal workforce because the employees are given a chance to raise and speak dissatisfaction issues to the higher levels. This enables managers to accordingly take actions towards improving things.
3. **Lateral/Horizontal Communication:** this involves communication that takes place at same levels of

hierarchy in an organization. It applies to communication between peers, managers at some levels. The flow of communication is not beyond those at the same level in the same organization.

4. **Diagonal Communication:** this is communication that takes place between a manager and employees of other workgroup.
5. **External Communication:** this is communication that takes place between a principal and external group such as education board, Ministry of education, suppliers, vendors, etc.

However, communication can take place in this format in an organization using these six formats:

1. Memo: Less formal than letter, more likely to be read, not confidential.
2. Notice boards: May never be read, good for staff to staff
3. Letter to staff: Private, personal
4. Email: Private, less formal than letter, less likely to be kept like letter.
5. Faxes: Personal, public
6. Internal Newsletter: Public, not for bad news, useful for minor but important news.

Other aspects of communication can be presented in a systematical order on a regular basis and to be as relevant, local, and timely as possible. The basis for this is because communication needed to be clear, easily understood and concise (Armstrong, 2012) ^[3]. In a further explanation by Armstrong, variety of communication methods existed and thus needed be it in spoken and written, direct and indirect. No organization survives when there is no proper communication flow. Communication is a way of expressing thoughts, ideas, feelings etc. Hence, all administrators need communication skill if effective must be achieved in the organization. In supporting the statement, Bennis and Nanus in Virginia (2008) ^[14] emphasized that leadership is all about communicating and effective principals regularly utilize communication skills in soliciting beliefs and ideas, advocating positions, and persuading others. Virginia (2008) ^[14] contributed that principals provide for systematic two-way communication with staff regarding the achievement standards and the improvement goals of the school; establish supports, and implements activities that communicate the value and meaning of learning to students; develop and uses communication channels with parents to set forth school objectives. Thus, communication emerged as a theme from the studies regarding the leader's role in providing focus on the vision and shaping the culture. Arlestig (2007:17) ^[2] said, "Through communication, the principal leads and unifies his or her staff members in the work necessary for academic results and school improvement".

Technical Skills refers to the proficiency or ability to use the tool, methods, processes, procedures and techniques of a specialized field (in this case, education) to perform specific tasks. A surgeon, an engineer, a musician, a psychologist, a guidance counselor and others have technical skills in their respective fields. The school administrator needs enough technical skill to be able to accomplish the mechanics of the job he/she is responsible for. This skill is important for the head teachers in the UBE scheme. It will enhance the effective supervision and instruction aspect in school

management. Other skills in this category are the finance and business management, school- community relation, teacher-pupil personnel and physical facilities development skills respectively. Oluwuo and Abraham (2006) ^[12] saw these as core to the development of effective school system. Head teachers are therefore encouraged to develop themselves in the suggested areas to enhance their productivity and well-being of the education system.

Research Questions

The following research questions raised guided the study

1. What is the relationship between communication skill and management in open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state?
2. What is the relationship between technical skill and management in open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the conducts of the study.

3. There is no significant relationship between communication skill and management in open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state?
4. There is no significant relationship between technical skill and management in open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state?

Methodology

The study investigated administrators’ competences and management of open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state. The study was conducted in the

University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, all public universities in Rivers State. This study adopted correlational research design involving five hundred (500) educational administrators and managers. A simple random sampling technique was used to get a sample size of 150 educational administrators and managers using Taro Yemen formula as provided by Nwankwo, (2001) ^[11]. Structured questionnaire titled “Administrators’ Competencies and Effective Management of Open and Distance Learning Scale (ACEMODLS)” was used to elicit response from the educational administrators and managers. The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbush Alpha. The research questions were analyze using mean criterion of 2.5. The 4 point Likert scale response was used. The response pattern is structured on the 4 points Likert scale of (SA) strongly agree, (A) agree, (D) disagree and (SD) strongly disagree. SA= 4, A= 3, D= 2, SD =1. The reverse was adopted for negatively stated items. Hypothesis was tested using T-test with use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.

Results

1. **Research question one:** What is the relationship between communication skill and management in open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state?

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between communication skill and management in open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state?

Table 1: Response on the relationship between communication skill and management in open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state?

S/N	Administrators’ Competencies	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	S.D	Remark
Q1	Instructors assigned to learners in open and distance learning programme must possess technical skill.	70	60	15	5	3.3	1.5	Accepted
Q2	Instructors assigned to learners in open and distance learning programme must possess human skill.	74	56	10	10	3.2	1.3	Accepted
Q3	Instructors assigned to learners in open and learning programme must possess conceptual skill.	21	9	25	90	1.6	0.9	Rejected
Q4	Knowledge imparted in open and distance learning must be authentic.	100	30	15	5	3.5	1.7	Accepted
Q5	Instructors must be able to organize and establish interaction between course content and the learners.	90	35	15	10	3.4	1.6	Accepted

Source: Researcher’s field work, 2021

Table 2: One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
VAR00001	5	3.0000	.79057	.35355

Table 3: One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 2.5					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
VAR00001	1.414	4	.230	.50000	-.4816	1.4816

Table 1 identified response rate of the role of administrators’ competencies in open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers State. Item 1,2, 4 and 5, in the table above with mean value of 3.3, 3.2, 3.5 and 3.4 respectively was accepted by the respondents as their mean value was greater than the mean criterion of 2.5, while item 3 was rejected by the respondents as their mean value of 1.6 was below the criterion mean of 2.5.

In the test hypothesis table above, the table shows that the mean (x) standard deviation (SD) and degree of freedom (DF) as 3.00, 0.79 and 4 respectively.

Judging from the decision rule where the hypothesis is to be

rejected if the P-value is less than the chosen alpha. Thus, since the P-value (0.230) is greater than the chosen alpha (0.05), the null hypothesis is accepted and the alternate is rejected. Hence, the result implies that there is a significant difference in role played by administrators’ competencies in the enhancement of open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state.

Research question Two: What is the relationship between technical skill and management in open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state??

1. **H₀₂:** There is no significant relationship between technical skill and management in open and distance

learning in public universities in Rivers state?
 2. Table 2: Response on the relationship between technical

skill and management in open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state?

Table 4: Depicts the response rate

S/N	Management	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	S.D	Remark
Q1	Open and distance learning programme must be effectively planned to ensure effective implementation.	90	20	28	12	3.2	1.4	Accepted
Q2	Effective implementation of open and distance learning programme entails an integrated involvement of all stakeholders.	80	50	10	10	3.3	1.5	Accepted
Q3	The media used in open and distance learning programme must ensure effective combination of communication and technology tools.	100	20	15	15	3.4	1.6	Rejected
Q4	The performance model selected for the distance learning programme is valid.	95	25	28	10	3.5	1.7	Accepted
Q5	The theory selected for the distance learning programme is rigorously applied.	25	90	30	5	2.4	1.6	Accepted

Source: Researcher’s field work, 2021

Table 5: One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
VAR00002	5	3.3600	.11402	.05099

Table 6: One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 2.5					
	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
VAR00002	16.866	4	.000	.86000	.7184	1.0016

Table 2 depicts the response rate of role played by effective management in the enhancement of open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers State. Item 1,2, 3 and 4, in the table above with mean value of 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 and 3. respectively was accepted by the respondents as their mean value was greater than the mean criterion of 2.5, while item 5 was rejected by the respondents are their mean value of 2.4 was below the criterion mean of 2.5.

In the test hypothesis table above, the table shows that the mean (\bar{x}) standard deviation (SD) and degree of freedom (DF) as 3.36, 0.11402 and 4 respectively.

Judging from the decision rule where the hypothesis is to be rejected if the P-value is less than the chosen alpha. Thus, since the P-value (0.000) is less than the chosen alpha (0.05), the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate is sustained. Hence, the result implies that there is significant difference in the role played by effective management in the enhancement of open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers state.

Discussion

The role of administrators’ competencies in open and distance learning

As much as good administrators need to possess certain innate traits and characteristics, the kinds of skills which they exhibit in carrying out their jobs effectively is important as well. The role of administrators’ competencies in open and distance learning cannot be overemphasized especially with the daily expansion in the enrolment of learners in open and distance learning programmes as a result of the growing needs of present day learners in Nigeria, As used here, a skill implies an ability which can be developed, not necessarily inborn, and which is manifested in performance, not merely in potential. So the principal criterion of skillfulness must be effective action under varying conditions. Successful administration appears to rest on three basic skills, which we will call technical, human, and conceptual. It would be unrealistic to assert that these skills are not interrelated, yet there may be real merit in examining

each one separately, and in developing them independently. Technical skill implies an understanding of, and proficiency in, a specific kind of activity, particularly one involving methods, processes, procedures, or techniques. Technical skill involves specialized knowledge, analytical ability within that specialty, and facility in the use of the tools and techniques of the specific discipline. It is the skill required of the greatest number of people. Most of our vocational and on-the-job training programs are largely concerned with developing this specialized technical skill.

Human skill is the executive’s ability to work effectively as a group member and to build cooperative effort within the team he leads. As *technical* skill is primarily concerned with working with “things” (processes or physical objects), so *human* skill is primarily concerned with working with people. This skill is demonstrated in the way the individual perceives (and recognizes the perceptions of) his superiors, equals, and subordinates, and in the way he behaves subsequently. Human skill is so vital a part of everything the administrator does.

Conceptual skill involves the ability to see the enterprise as a whole; it includes recognizing how the various functions of the organization depend on one another, and how changes in any one part affect all the others; and it extends to visualizing the relationship of the individual business to the industry, the community, and the political, social, and economic forces of the nation as a whole. Recognizing these relationships and perceiving the significant elements in any situation, the administrator should then be able to act in a way which advances the over-all welfare of the total organization. Hence, the success of any decision depends on the conceptual skill of the people who make the decision and those who put it into action. Not only does the effective coordination of the various parts of the business depend on the conceptual skill of the administrators involved, but so also does the whole future direction and tone of the organization.

The major findings of this study show that administrators’ competencies provides for the impartation of authentic knowledge and vital practices that standardizes the learning

programme and as a matter of priority, the all-round qualification of an administrator should be emphasized.

The test hypothesis asserts that administrators' competencies play a significant role in the enhancement of open and distance learning in public universities.

The role of effective management in open and distance learning

Management performs organizing, planning, coordination, motivating, controlling, decision making, and leading. It contains the 5M features of the organization. It is also called the 5M's Model of management. There are mentioned the 5M's full form. Such as:

To be an effective manager, one needs to develop a set of skills, including planning, communication, organization and leadership. One will also need an extensive knowledge of the company's goals and how to direct employees, sales and other operations to accomplish them. In general, there are five basic functions of a manager: setting objectives, organizing, motivating the team, devising systems of measurement and developing people. Managers must have leadership skills to use these five operations successfully. They are responsible for coaching their team members by helping them recognize their strengths and weaknesses and improve their performance. Different managers may have different styles of leadership. Regardless of their style, managers should develop their leadership skills to be effective supervisors.

In spite of the enthusiasm generated by the new thrust in open and distance learning, overall problems that may impede effective implementation that are to be understood and taken care of by administrators and managers are; Lack of consistency in programme/policy implementation, problem of electricity, poor telecommunication facilities and lacks of access, poor postal system, poor economic situations and its effects on middle level manpower, poor ICT penetration, etc. These problems and many more, if not addressed will impede effective implementation and management of open and distance learning in public universities.

The major findings of this study show that effective management ensures the combination of communication and technology tools, integrated involvement of all stakeholders and effective planning to actualize successful implementation of the open and distance learning programme in public universities in Rivers state and Nigeria as a whole. The test hypothesis asserts that management play a significant role in fostering open and distance learning in public universities.

Conclusions

The study investigated administrators' competencies and management of open and distance learning in public universities in Rivers State. The study concludes that administrators' competencies provides for the impartation of authentic knowledge and vital practices that standardizes the learning programme; and that management ensures the combination of communication and technology tools, integrated involvement of all stakeholders and effective planning to actualize successful implementation of the open and distance learning programme in public universities.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that

1. Emphasis should be laid on the all- round qualification of administrators of open and distance learning programmes in order to ascertain their competency.

2. Seminars and workshops should be readily made available and accessible for administrators and managers of open and distance learning programmes which will help to acquaint them with updated technology and "media-mix" necessary for effective implementation.
3. Experiential learning should be promoted for learners in the open and distance learning programmes in order to enhance their learning.

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