

Open and Distance Learning and Rural Women Empowerment for Sustainable Livelihood in South East Nigeria

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Abstract

The livelihood of most rural women are dependent on informal sectors such as farming (crop cultivation, livestock rearing), trade (selling of fruits, vegetables, food stuff, cooking utensils), services (tailoring, hair dressing, road side restaurant), and other menial casual works. Most of these women lack basic modern skills in their daily activities which stems from lack of proper formal education. It is in this regard that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has become essential as a good alternative for formal education due to its simplicity, affordability and accessibility even to the inaccessible and remote rural areas. Education being the bedrock of human development is the greatest tool which can uplift these women from their demeaning existence to a meaningful life. Right application of ODL will not only improve the economic conditions of these women but also that of the entire region. This work studies the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in empowering sustainable livelihoods of rural women in south east Nigeria. The study is carried out in National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) study centres located in Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi States. Primary data are collected through questionnaire administered to respondents and analyzed using simple statistics, while secondary data are collected from different sources such as published books, journal articles, websites and government gazette.

Keywords: Livelihood, distance learning, rural women, women development, education

Introduction

Background

In Nigeria, rural areas are often referred to as villages, communities or even hometowns. The inhabitants are usually poor and lack basic amenities such as pipe borne water, electricity, poorly maintained educational and health institutions. Other features of the rural areas include high infant mortality rate, lack of banking facilities, informal job opportunities, lack of housing planning, etc. Under these conditions, and in accordance with Nigeria patriarchal family system, it is expected that every man should provide for his family to ameliorate the suffering common in rural life. Unfortunately, rural women are increasingly becoming the breadwinners of their families. They have become great agents of change and prosperity and have individually and collectively

contributed in improving the conditions of rural dwellers. In South East Nigeria, the women perform very important roles in families and in entire community as a whole. They are active participants in almost all informal sectors of rural life such as subsistence farming (crop cultivation, livestock rearing, production of palm oil), trade (selling of fruits, vegetables, food stuff, cooking utensils), services (tailoring, hair dressing, road side restaurant), and other menial casual works. These services by the rural women ensure not only the availability of food but also education and health provisions for the children and entire community. Unfortunately, in spite of the efforts by rural women to uplift the conditions of the rural area and to better their lives and that of their children, the rural area is still bedeviled with all sorts of infrastructural and developmental challenges. These challenges stem from the fact that most of these rural women lack basic modern skills in their daily activities due to lack of formal education. This education deficiency has limited their ability to exploit their human and environmental potentials for the benefits of their communities. Such potentials include access to soft loans, benefits of cooperative societies, recruitment into formal sectors, benefits of girl-child education, family planning and knowledge of governmental policies that benefit subsistence farmers and petty traders. Unfortunately, rural women access to formal education is limited as it is not only expensive but also inaccessible to most of them. In order to bridge this education gap, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) becomes a great alternative for the rural women to acquire education and better their lives and that of their children and community. In this work, we are going to look into the role of Open and Distance Learning as a vehicle to enhance the livelihood of rural women for sustainable development.

Statement of Problem

The impact of rural women to the overall development of Nigeria has not been significantly felt or acknowledged by relevant authorities in Nigeria. In the face of dwindling oil resources and acknowledgement by the Nigeria Federal Government that the Nigeria economy needs to diversify to agriculture, the rural women need to be taken into great consideration as their potential is still untapped and needed to be harnessed for national development. The potentials in resources such as agriculture, fishing, mining that abound in Nigeria rural area can only be exploited and harnessed with full incorporation of the rural women. Unfortunately, rural women have been left to wallow in abject poverty. Their farming skill is still at the level of most basic where local hoes, cutlasses and sickles are being used in planting and harvesting. Women cooperative societies are not encouraged and where they exist, they are limited to provision of soft loans to members through pooling resources together known locally as *isusu*. The women are largely illiterates. The manufacturing industries such as palm oil processing, mining, iron smelting are being done in most basic form. Palm oil processing which has become a multi-billion dollars industry (Zion Market Research, 2016) is being done with the use of wooden ship and mortar. Fishing industries in south east region of Nigeria is almost non-existent. Trading is also restricted to the most basic home needs such as food stuffs, kitchen utensils, fruits, vegetables, etc. The condition of rural women is made worse by the level of illiteracy among them. According to Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (2018), the literacy level of Nigeria men to women is 70.9 to 59.3 percent. This problem of illiteracy made it difficult

for women to access modern income generating opportunities and services that will not only improve their skills but also give them access to information that will guarantee a better living condition for sustainable livelihood. Education provides alternatives and better opportunities to people and for rural women whose opportunities for conventional education have been restricted by factors beyond their control; Open and Distance Learning becomes their only opportunity to acquire education.

Objectives

The general objective of this paper is to ascertain the position of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system as an alternative to conventional universities for rural women, while the specific objective is to determine the opportunities offered by Open and Distance Learning in improving the livelihood of rural women

Conceptual Framework

Rural Area

In order to understand the nature and characteristics of rural women in South east Nigeria, we need to look at the concept of rural. There is no universal acceptable definition of rural area. Several studies explain rural area in terms of population density (American Census Bureau, Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics), or in terms of what is not being urban (Ele, 2006; Office National des Statistiques (ONS), 2011; Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2012) or glaring lack of basic infrastructure (Afolayan, 1995). Almost all the definitions of rural area suggest either one or combination of the following “pastoral landscapes, unique demographic structures and settlement patterns, isolation, low population density, extractive economic activities, and distinct socio cultural milieus” (Hart, Larson, & Lishner, nd). In Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics (2009) defines rural area as neighbourhood that has a population of 20,000 people or less. Rural areas in South East Nigeria are characterised by low population and low building density, subsistence agricultural activity, near absence of rental buildings, small markets, few transportation business which buses are mainly rickety in nature, presence of African Tradition Religion (ATR) artefacts, low economic activities etc.

Education

Education provides people with the requisite skill to survive and conquer their environmental challenges. It is a sine qua non for any society that wants to develop. According to UNESCO (2000) education is seen as “the total process of developing human ability and behaviours”. Boyi (2013) states that education provides consciousness, awareness and enlightenment to individuals in order to properly pursue their aspirations and yearnings. This explanation by Boyi is very apt as it explains that education makes people to be conscious of certain barriers that limit their potentials and provides enlightenment that will help individuals to pursue those aspirations in order to realise

their full potentials. Education also enhances women participation in decision making organs of their communities which helps in eradicating some obnoxious traditional laws that limit them.

Open Distance Learning

Open Distance Learning (ODL) or Open Distance Education (ODE) has been described by UNESCO (2002) as teaching “conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner, and that it aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure”. This explanation implies that ODL is not restricted by time, distance and rigid curriculum which may be difficult for the rural women to observe.

Theoretical Framework

Marxist theory of development is the theoretical framework on which this work will be anchored. According to this theory, development is all about human socio-cultural, political and economic improvement. Most scholars of this theory define development as ability of an individual to positively exploit his environment for self and societal improvement. According to Nnoli (1982) development, is a dialectical phenomenon in which the individual and society interact with their physical environment and transforming it for their own economic advancement. He strongly emphasis that development does not mean presence of western artefacts such as modern road, skyscrapers, latest fashion or vehicle. He acknowledged that while these may be indicators of wealth, it cannot be term development if the people are not involved in their production. Rodney (1972) views development as “increased skills and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material wellbeing”. Rodney’s emphasis in skill acquisition, capacity building and creativity echoes the assertion that development can never be divorced from education. The development of any nation or community is dependent on the literacy level of the members as Majasan (1997) rightly stated that development “in any society is anchored primarily to educational progresses”.

Development, sustainable livelihood and education are interlinked because there can never be sustainable livelihood without development and no development occurs in absence of education. People must be empowered through education for them to cope with everyday environmental challenges, reduce their poverty level, increase their production outputs and contribute to national development. In South East Nigeria where rural women are confronted with enormous problems that revolve around reproduction, economic production and child rearing, it becomes clearer that education becomes the feasible source of skill acquisition, safe reproductive process and economic improvement. Unfortunately, the conventional education system has proved inadequate to cater for the needs of the rural women and therefore in order to improve their social, economic, leadership and communications skills and creativity and per capita income, rural women have increasingly become involved in Open and Distance Learning.

Methodology

Area of Study

This study is limited to south east geopolitical region of Nigeria. Nigeria is a country made up of 36 states and a federal capital territory (FCT) that are grouped into six geo-political zones: North West, North East, North central, South West, South East and South South. The South East geo-political region is made up of 5 states, namely, Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. The study area comprises of three states of Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi states.

Methods of Data Collection

This study makes use of both primary and secondary sources in data collection. Secondary data relating to statistical reports on National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and University admission, 2016 applications into Federal Universities, demographic literacy rates, etc., is collected from NBS (Nigeria Bureau of Statistics), Central Bank, JAMB and other governmental agencies published and unpublished documents.

Research Design

Reports concerning respondents' reasons for enrolling into ODL and benefits of the programme for the rural women are products of primary survey. A survey design was adopted in the study. A sample size of 500 was selected. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the three most populated NOUN study centres from the three states selected and the two community based study centres in the south east. These community based study centres were selected because they are mostly being patronised by rural women. Therefore, five study centres were used for the study.

The Participation of South East Women in Higher Education

South East Women in Conventional Higher Education

South East Nigeria is seen as one of the educationally advantaged region in Nigeria. For south east women, higher education offers great opportunity for an ordered and enhanced life style. It helps them to become more visible in performing social roles and taking initiatives when needed. The Table 1 show the number of 2017 enrollees into Nigeria universities that are situated in south east Nigeria while Table 2 shows the number of candidates from South East Nigeria that were successful in 2018 university undergraduate admission.

Table 1: 2017 University Undergraduate and Post Graduate Enrolment in South East Nigeria

UNI	UNDERGRAD		POST GRAD		TOTAL		PERCENTAGES	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	% male	%female
ABSU	9485	11727	1562	521	11047	12248	47.4	52.6
ALEX	2677	2507	40	30	2717	2520	51.9	48.1
CLIFFORD	149	57	-	-	149	57	72.3	27.7
COAL CITY	40	42	-	-	40	42	48.8	51.2
EASTERN	14	18	-	-	14	18	43.8	56.3
EBSU	9,620	9,222	-	-	9,620	9,222	51.1	48.9
ESUT	8,858	9,447	1,053	701	9,911	10,148	49.4	50.6
EVANGEL	215	200	-	-	215	200	51.8	48.2
FUTO	15,102	5,822	1,116	435	16,218	6,257	72.2	27.8
GODFREY	256	284	-	-	256	284	47.4	52.6
GREGORY	345	271	-	-	345	271	56.0	44.0
HEZEKIAH	46	26	-	-	46	26	63.9	36.1
IMSU	9,244	11,008	1,500	1,530	10,744	12,538	46.1	53.9
LEGACY	17	31			17	31	35.4	64.6
MADONNA	4,678	7,664	60	42	4,738	7,706	38.1	61.9
MOUA	20,16	17,747	3,754	3,687	23,916	21,434	52.7	47.3
NAU	17,932	18,837	2,139	1,434	20,071	20,271	49.8	50.2
NOVENA	178	119	137	72	315	191	62.3	37.7
PAUL	200	152			200	152	56.8	43.2
RENAISSANCE	144	178			144	178	44.7	55.3
TANSIAN	319	176			319	176	64.4	35.6
UNN	19,438	17,032	6,350	4,351	25,788	21,383	54.7	45.3
TOTAL					136830	125353		

Source: 2018 NBS Statistical Report on Women and Men in Nigeria

The above data shows that in 2018, universities in South East which are predominately patronised by the local indigenes admitted 262,183 candidates into their undergraduate and post graduate studies. This figure comprises 136,830 male candidates and 125,353 female candidates. This report as high as it seems by Nigeria rate of university admission is still inadequate for south east women.

In 2018, there is an appreciable rise in the number of candidates admitted, as Table 2 below shows.

Table 2: 2018 University Undergraduate Admissions in South East Nigeria

States	Female	Male	Total
Abia	25,487	22,361	47,848
Anambra	40,242	32,629	72,871
Ebonyi	14,418	15,424	29,842
Enugu	34,877	27,762	62,639
Imo	50,866	42,182	93,048
	165,890	140,358	306,248

Data Source: April 2019 National Bureau of Statistics /Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board

The above table shows that the number of female candidates that got admission into higher education is above the number of male candidates admitted in the same year. Above statistics notwithstanding, the number fall below the number of candidates especially female ones seeking admission into higher education to improve their lot in life.

Open and Distance Learning in South East Nigeria

The conventional university education system as noted above has proved inadequate to cater for the overwhelming number of applicants seeking for university admission. In April, 2019, Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board, a body responsible for admission into higher institutions of learning in Nigeria stated that in 2018 alone, 1,653,127 applications were received for university admission out of which only 549,763 candidates were eventually admitted into various institutions of higher learning in Nigeria (NBS/JAMB, 2018). This statistics shows that less than one third or 33.3% of people seeking admission succeeded in getting admission in 2018. The report also indicated that of this number that was eventually given admission, 302,183 candidates were male while 247,580 candidates were female. This indicates that female candidates made up only 45% of the admitted candidates.

Fortunately, some of the unsuccessful candidates seek solace in Open and Distance Learning in which the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is most famous in Nigeria. NOUN admission is more open than conventional admission. Unlike conventional universities, there is no mandatory entrance examination into NOUN. All a candidate needs is to meet the minimum national requirements for university registration which is a good grade in examination administered by any of these two bodies: West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council Organisation (NECO). In NOUN admission, such restricting criteria that are used in conventional university admissions such as catchment areas and less advantaged educational areas are nonexistent. The admission process is done online and authenticated at the candidate's preferred study centre.

NOUN has 78 study centres nationwide and 10 of these study centres are cited in South East Nigeria. While 7 of the south east centres are free for every interested member of the public, the other 3 study centres are specialised study centres that were created to cater for the needs of prison inmates. Table 3 displays the study centres and the states where they are sited.

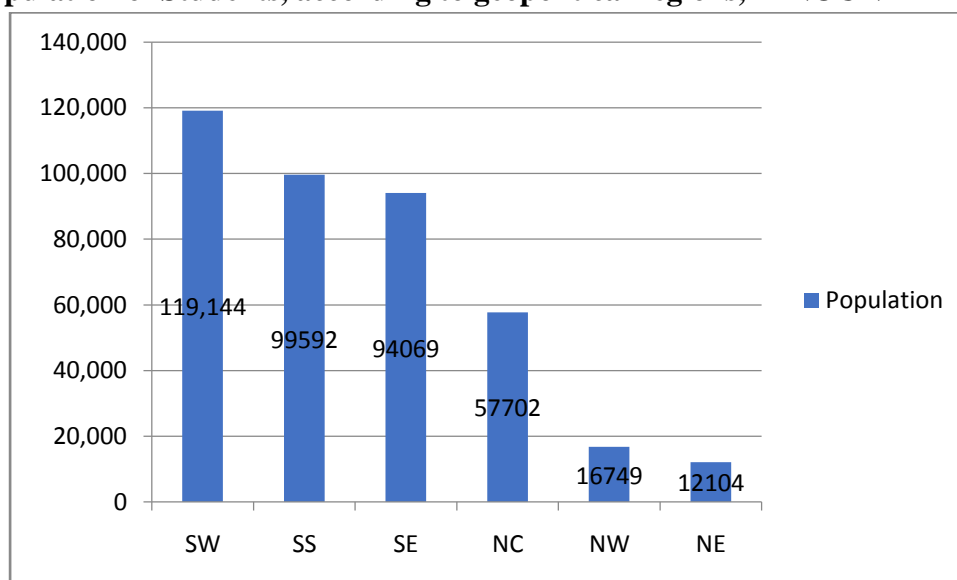
Table 3: NOUN Study Centres in South East Nigeria

State	Centre
Abia	Umudike Study Centre
Abia	NOUN Special Study Centre Nigeria Prisons, Umudike
Anambra	Awka Study Centre
Anambra	NOUN Special Study Centre Nigeria Prisons, Awka
Ebonyi	Abakaliki Study Centre
Enugu	Enugu Study Centre
Enugu	NOUN Special Study Centre Nigeria Prisons, Enugu Maximum Prisons
Enugu	NOUN Community Study Centre, National Development Centre, Orie Awgu, Enugu State.
Enugu	OPI Community Study Center
Imo	Owerri Study Centre

Source: National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) Website

These study centres in the Southeast Nigeria have a population of 94,069 students as Table 4 shows.

Table 4: Population of Students, according to geopolitical regions, in NOUN



Source: <http://www.nou.edu.ng/news/north-lags-behind-distance-learning>

Open and Distance Learning in Rural Women Empowerment

A questionnaire titled Participants Assessment of the Role of ODL in Women empowerment was used to collect data. The instrument was given to four academic staff of the rank of Senior Lecturer and above in the Institute of Management and Technology (IMT) Enugu, Nigeria, who validated it. The reliability of instrument was also tested when it was administered to 100 students from Umudike and Owerri Study Centres who were not among the centres selected for this study. Split-half reliability test was used for the analysis, and reliability co-efficient attained was 0.8.

Out of 500 questionnaires administered, only 456 were returned by the respondents which mean 91.2 percent retrieval. Analysis of data was done using mean and percentage and presented in tables and bar chart.

Table 5: The Sample Size

State	Centre	Sample for the study
Anambra	Awka Study Centre	120
Ebonyi	Abakaliki Study Centre	120
Enugu	Enugu Study Centre	120
Enugu	NOUN Community Study Centre, National Development Centre, Orie Awgu, Enugu State. Awgu, Enugu	70
Enugu	OPI Community Study Center	70
Total		500

Advantages of ODL over Conventional Universities for Rural Women

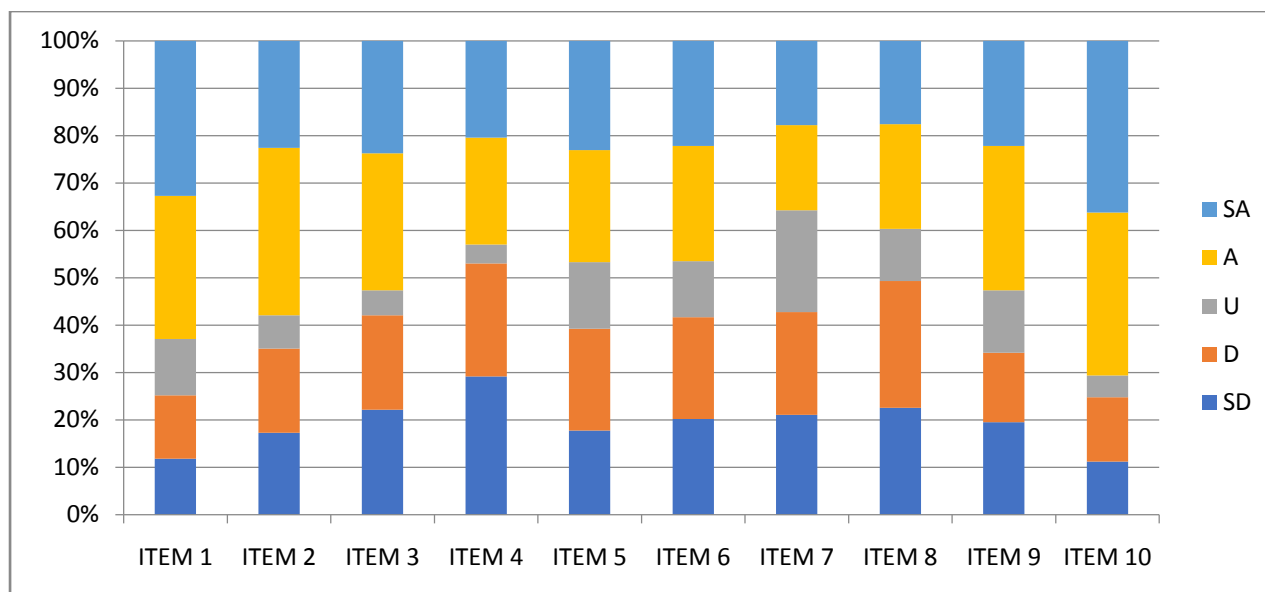
Table 6: Responses of the respondents on the advantages of ODL over conventional universities

S/N	Item	SD: Strongly Disagree D: Disagree U: Undecided A: Agree SA: Strongly Agree					Mean	Remark
		SD	D	U	A	SA		
1	Admission process in ODL is easier than conventional university	54	61	54	138	149	3.59	Accept
2	All categories of students in ODL pay lesser fees than their counterpart in conventional university	79	81	32	161	103	3.28	Accept
3	Online reading materials offered in ODL greatly reduce the cost of buying textbooks	101	91	24	132	108	3.12	Accept
4	There are more access to facilitators	133	109	18	103	93	2.81	Reject
5	ODL reduces conflict between the pursuit of career and quest for education	81	98	64	108	105	3.13	Accept
6	ODL reduces constraint posed by distance in pursuit of education	92	98	54	111	101	3.07	Accept
7	There is great students – management relationship in ODL	96	99	98	82	81	2.90	Reject
8	Administration of examination and checking of result is very convenient for students.	103	122	50	101	80	2.85	Reject
9	ODL course contents and online reading materials are of high international standard	89	67	60	139	101	3.21	Accept
10	There is greater accessibility of reading materials in ODL than in conventional universities	51	62	21	157	165	3.71	Accept

N: 456

Source: Field work by the author

In presenting the percentages of the score in a bar chart, all the items will be listed by their serial numbers. Item 1 which is “Admission process in ODL is easier than conventional university” will be listed as Item I in bar chart to minimise cumbersome data presentation.



Percentage score of the items on “Responses of the respondents on the advantages of ODL for rural women over conventional universities”.

Ways ODL Improves the Livelihood of Rural Women

Table 7: Responses of the respondents on the role of ODL in improving the livelihood of rural women

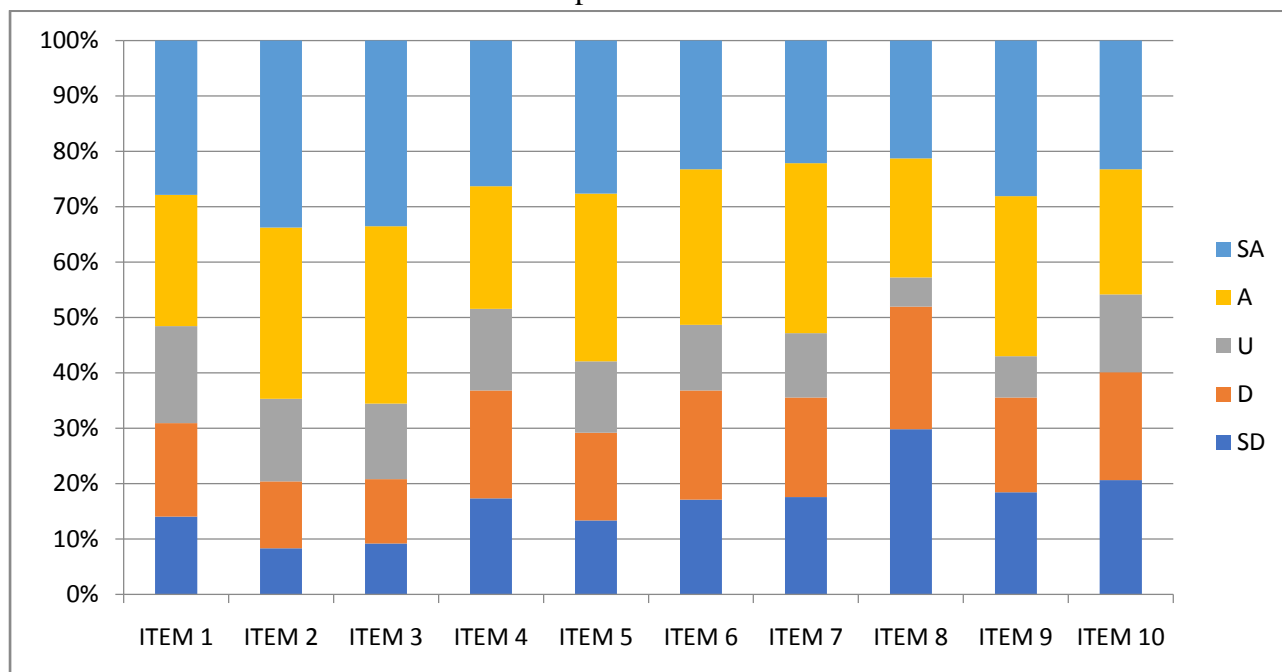
S/N	Item	SD: Strongly Disagree D: Disagree U: Undecided A: Agree SA: Strongly Agree					Mean	Remark
		SD	D	U	A	SA		
1	ODL helps in improving the marketing skills of participants	64	77	80	108	127	3.34	Accept
2	Education offered through ODL has improved confidence level of students	38	55	68	141	154	3.70	Accept
3	Career options and advancement are enhanced through participation in ODL	42	53	62	146	153	3.69	Accept
4	ODL participation helps in improving interpersonal relationship	79	89	67	101	120	3.21	Accept
5	The flexibility of ODL courses has positive impact on sole proprietorship type of business	61	72	59	138	126	3.43	Accept

6	Participation in ODL has made the students have strong feelings of self worth and fulfilment.	78	90	54	128	106	3.21	Accept
7	Knowledge of reproductive health and benefits of family planning is one of the major gains in participating in ODL	80	82	53	140	101	3.22	Accept
8	Government policies that improve the conditions of rural areas are made available to all students	136	101	24	98	97	2.64	Reject
9	Girl education is encouraged in ODL	84	78	34	132	128	3.31	Accept
10	Knowledge of modern methods of local production of goods and services are acquired through ODL.	94	89	64	103	106	3.08	Accept

N: 456

Source: Field work by the author

In presenting the percentages of the score in a bar chart, all the items will be listed by their serial numbers. Item 1 which is “ODL improves the marketing skills of participants” will be listed as Item I in bar chart to minimise cumbersome data presentation.



Percentage score of the items on Responses of the respondents on the role of ODL in improving the livelihood of rural women.

Discussion

From the data presented in Table 6 above, it is observed that administration of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) by National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has made admission into higher education easy and flexible for rural women in south east Nigeria. Seven of the item presented show that ODL is favourably considered to be very apt for rural women more than conventional universities. Three items were rejected by the study. Students complain of lack of adequate access to both the facilitators and school management. Another area of concern is the administration of examination by the school which the students often complain of inadequate time, malfunctioning of website and uploading of incomplete results in school portal. Table 7 which presented the responses of the respondents on the impact of ODL on women empowerment shows that nine of the items presented were accepted while only one was rejected. This shows that ODL has impacted positively on the livelihood of rural women.

Conclusion

From the finding, it would be concluded that ODL has facilitated easy and flexible higher education opportunities for rural women and has also impacted positively in improving their livelihood for sustainable development.

Recommendations

The following are recommendation suggested to improve the administration of ODL for benefit of rural women.

1. The facilitators of study centres should make themselves more accessible to students especially the rural women who may not have been properly guided on the operation of the school portal.
2. The school management should also make effort in having an open door policy in order to guide the students.
3. Efforts should be intensified by the school management to expand its skill acquisition programme to accommodate the interest of the rural women.
4. Government economic policies that are meant to improve the conditions of the rural women should also be widely publicised by the school.

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