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Original Research

Learners' Experiences of Distance Learning: Challenges, Opportunities and Informing Best Practices

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ABSTRACT

To address the lack of student-centered evidence in Nigerian open and distance learning, this study investigates the lived experiences of Distance Learning Centre students at the University of Ibadan. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten purposively selected 300-level undergraduates enrolled in the University's Distance Learning Centre. The results highlight that learning hurdles are systemically linked and include financial constraints, inadequate digital infrastructure, unreliable internet access, delayed feedback, and social isolation. These impediments underline how embedded organizational norms dictate engagement levels. Even with these limitations, participants noted key benefits, including greater flexibility, improved educational access, better inclusion for learners with disabilities, enhanced digital literacy and stronger self-directed learning skills. The implementation of interactive, technology-based platforms such as helpdesks, discussion forums, and webinars serves to boost engagement and mitigate user isolation. The research highlights critical success factors for enhancing the educational experience, notably robust technical and academic support systems, systematic instructor feedback, interactive curriculum design, and equitable institutional approaches. Overall, these results underline how to leverage learner independence within constrained environments, offering actionable solutions for better quality, accessibility, and efficacy in distance education in Nigeria and similar contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of technology has transformed learning, making education more available, flexible, and convenient. Distance learning, notably, has emerged as a popular mode of education that allows students to obtain learning materials, communicate with facilitators, and other students remotely. The proliferation of distance learning has been driven by advances in digital technologies, including learning management systems, video conferencing tools, and mobile devices. National Centre for Education Statistics (2025) says enrolment in distance learning courses has increased significantly in the last ten years; more than 61% of higher education students in America are taking at least one online course. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, online learning has gained immense popularity, with around 21% of Britons embracing digital education (Oxford College, 2022). Distance learning in Nigeria has experienced significant growth over the years. According to the National Universities Commission (NUC), 29 universities have been approved to operate

Distance Learning Centres in Nigeria, in addition to the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), which is the only single-mode university mandated for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) (National Universities Commission [NUC], 2025). These universities offer a range of programmes, including undergraduate and graduate degrees, through distance learning modes (NUC, 2025).

Kanwar and Mishra (2016), Odukoya et al. (2014), and Adamu (2022) trace remote education in Nigeria to 1887, with students enrolled as external students for correspondence education. Adamu (2022) also highlights the potential of open and distance learning to expand access to quality education that is affordable, upskilling, and lifelong learning. Although growing in impact and offering great prospects for the educational sector, infrastructure, accessibility, and quality assurance remain ongoing hurdles to implementation (Yidana et al., 2023). Thus, with its growing popularity, distance learning presents unique challenges for learners, instructors, and institutions. Learners must navigate technical issues, manage their time effectively, and stay motivated where there is no physical interface. Instructors must adapt their teaching methods to accommodate the online environment, using digital tools to engage learners and facilitate interaction. Institutions must ensure that their distance learning programmes meet the same standards of quality and rigor as their traditional programmes.

While distance learning has broadened access to higher education on a global scale and specifically within Nigeria, a deeper understanding of student experiences is needed to go beyond mere descriptions of opportunities and obstacles. This research adopts Transactional Distance Theory (Moore, 1973) and Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) as a combined framework. Together, these theories offer a lens to analyze how instructional structure, dialogue, and interaction define the online learning environment. Transactional Distance Theory evaluates the interplay between communicative gaps, curriculum rigidity, learner self-direction, and their consequence on academic success and engagement. In tandem, Social Presence Theory explains the significance of interaction, connection, and lifelike engagement in reducing feelings of isolation and social disconnection in digital spaces. Combined, these frameworks provide a better understanding of the way distance students manage the structural, transactional, and social dimensions of their educational experience. Within the University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre (UIDLC), these concerns are notably pertinent since the degree to which learners experience delayed feedback, limited interaction, technological barriers, and self-directed learning responsibilities demonstrates varying proportions of transactional distance and social presence. By applying these theories, the study moves beyond surface-level narration, facilitating a deep, conceptually grounded analysis of learner experiences. While distance education is well-documented, both globally and in Nigeria, there is a distinct lack of deep, learner-centric qualitative studies regarding specific institutions, such as the University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre.

As a premier Nigerian institution and a pioneer of distance learning centers established by a contemporary university, the University of Ibadan, a dual-mode university, offers a vital case study for analyzing distance learning. Contrasting with dedicated institutions like NOUN, the University of Ibadan operates a hybrid system, requiring remote learners to meet conventional standards while navigating unique structural and technological challenges, creating a unique educational setting that has not been thoroughly investigated. Thus, moving beyond traditional, policy-driven analysis, this research highlights the authentic experiences of individuals in Nigerian distance learning, emphasizing the needs of students with disabilities. It offers practical, experience-based recommendations designed to improve accessibility and effectiveness in open and distance learning (ODL) contexts. Thus, this research aids the effort by examining the experiences and perspectives of distance learners, with a focus on identifying the challenges they face, the opportunities they encounter, and the best practices they highlight to support their success.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing popularity of distance learning, many students face significant challenges that hinder their academic success. These challenges include technical issues, lack of motivation, and inadequate support from instructors and institutions. As a result, distance learners often experience higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement compared to their traditional counterparts. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the experiences and perspectives of distance learners to identify the challenges they face, the opportunities they encounter, and how distance learning can be improved to cater to their needs.

1.2. Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to explore the experiences and perspectives of distance learners in Nigeria. Specifically, the study:

i. Identified the challenges faced by distance learners in Nigeria.
ii. Investigated the opportunities and benefits associated with distance learning.
iii. Examined the best practices that support the success of distance learners.

1.3. Research Questions

To accomplish the research objectives, the following research questions were addressed:

i. What are the major challenges faced by distance learners in Nigeria?
ii. What opportunities and benefits do distance learners in Nigeria perceive as associated with distance learning?
iii. What best practices do distance learners in Nigeria identify to support their success?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Evolution of distance learning

Distance learning, defined as the education given to learners who are not physically present in a traditional classroom Karunaratne (2023) has undergone significant transformations over the years. While the historical development of this subject is thoroughly documented, current literature tends to focus on description rather than critical analysis, leaving a gap in understanding how past stages directly influence modern learning experiences. Thus, this review explores its evolution, benefits, and drawbacks, drawing upon scholarly works sourced from reputable academic databases. Distance learning has evolved significantly over the years, transforming from traditional correspondence courses, which entailed significant communication lag within a tightly regimented curriculum, to advanced digital learning environments. Initially, distance education was primarily conducted through mail-based correspondence programmes, where students received instructional materials and submitted assignments through postal services. While widening educational access, these models created substantial transactional distance between instructors and learners. However, this model, popular in the 19th and early 20th centuries, laid the foundation for modern distance learning. By the mid-20th century, technological advancements led to the integration of radio and television broadcasting into distance education. Institutions worldwide began using these media to deliver educational content to students in remote locations.

In Nigeria, for instance, the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation introduced radio-based distance education in 1960, followed by educational television programmes in 1966 (Kanwar & Mishra, 2016). This phase expanded access to education, though it still required students to rely on limited broadcast schedules and physical materials. Hence, increased reach did not fix the lack of two-way dialogue and engagement in these approaches. The emergence of open universities in the 1960s and 1980s marked a major shift in distance learning. Inspired by the achievements made by the Open University in the United Kingdom, many countries established similar institutions to provide accessible higher education. In Nigeria, the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) was established in 1976 to train teachers through distance learning, and the NOUN was established in 1983 (Adamu, 2022). These citadels of learning played an important role in broadening educational access, particularly for individuals unable to attend traditional universities, likewise reducing the perceived distance in teaching and learning interactions. While these centers of higher learning improved access, scholars like Ouko et al. (2025) and Duman (2023) have noted concerns around quality assurance, learner support, and completion rates.

However, the true transformation of distance learning occurred with the advent of the internet in the 1990s. The development of online learning platforms, such as learning management systems, Moodle, Blackboard and Canvas, enabled interactive and structured virtual classrooms. The Coronavirus pandemic increased the acceptance of digital learning, forcing institutions globally to transition to virtual classrooms, hybrid learning models, and remote assessments. This shift underscored the necessity of reliable digital infrastructure and equitable access to online education. While distance learning has come a long way from its early correspondence roots, challenges such as the digital divide, student engagement and instructional quality remain critical areas of focus. Looking ahead, advancements in artificial intelligence, personalised learning and virtual reality classrooms are expected to shape the future of distance education, making it more interactive, inclusive and effective (Christensen & Spackman, 2017). Thus, distance learning has not evolved in a straight, progressive line; rather, its history shows a complicated mix of innovation, opportunity and challenge. Consequently, scholarly focus must shift from mere historical narration toward contextualized, learner-centric analyses of these transformations.

2.2. Challenges in distance learning

Distance learning has become increasingly popular, offering flexibility and accessibility to learners worldwide however, it also presents unique challenges. This literature review explores the challenges, opportunities, and best practices in distance learning from the learner's perspective. Various researchers have identified several challenges faced by distance learners as:

2.2.1. Technical problems

Findings of Itasanmi et al. (2020) indicated that, while students rated their teaching and learning experiences, educational resources and infrastructural facilities relatively positively, they assessed the technical support services in place by their schools as abysmal. This suggests that, despite satisfactory

experiences in other areas, there is a significant need for improvement in the technical support offered to students in ODL programmes in institutions in Nigeria. Likewise, Akrofi et al. (2020) identified 11 challenges associated with Distance, Blended and Online Learning (DBOL), which they categorised into six overarching themes. One of these is the lack of infrastructure, where unreliable internet connectivity and limited access to necessary devices hinder effective learning. This is compounded by low or no IT skills, as many students and instructors struggle with navigating digital platforms and utilising online resources efficiently. This is also supported by Hara (2000) and Palloff and Pratt (2010), which suggest that internet signal instability and poor resolution can impede lessons. While studies categorize these issues as simple administrative failures, they often overlook the wider socio-economic landscape. In Nigeria, technology challenges are not just isolated inefficiencies but are deeply embedded in systemic problems like high data costs, unreliable power, and digital inequality, which lead to instructor-student disconnect.

2.2.2. Self-motivation

Additionally, self-discipline problems are common, as the flexibility of DBOL requires a high level of time management and motivation, which some learners find difficult to maintain. Remote students need to be self-driven and self-controlled to remain committed (Dille & Mezack, 1991; Keller, 2008). As widely documented, learner-related challenges such as self-motivation and time management are a major part of this literature; this implies that learners function within an enabling environment that supports autonomy. Attributing motivation entirely to individual responsibility ignores the structural, financial, and employment-related pressures that hinder learner engagement. This assumption fails in contexts where students face significant, competing demands alongside limited support.

2.2.3. Content delivery and limited feedback

Another key challenge is content issues, where course materials are not always adequately adapted for online delivery, making engagement and comprehension more difficult. Furthermore, policy issues arise due to the absence of clear guidelines and frameworks, leading to inconsistencies in implementation and assessment. Similarly, remote learners receive sparse feedback from tutors; this can affect their learning outcomes (Moller, 1998; Whipp & Lorentz, 2009). However, the impact of institutional constraints, such as staffing and limited staffing, on the consistency of feedback in distance learning remains under-explored.

2.2.4. Social isolation

Lastly, Rovai (2002) and Stacey (2002) say distance learners often feel disconnected from their peers and instructors. Thus, the way in which distance learning is designed leads to social issues such as limited student-teacher and peer interactions these contribute to feelings of isolation, reducing collaborative learning opportunities and overall satisfaction. Although these studies recognize the importance of community, they often treat interaction merely as a pedagogical variable, ignoring cultural contexts where collective learning is fundamental. In these settings, a lack of physical interaction can lead to more significant psychological and academic consequences. Tackling the challenges is important to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of distance and online learning programmes.

2.3. Opportunities in distance learning

Despite the challenges, distance learning also offers several opportunities, including:

2.3.1. Flexibility and Accessibility

Distance education and E-learning present numerous opportunities that enhance access to education, promote flexibility and facilitate lifelong learning. These educational modalities have revolutionised how knowledge is disseminated, particularly benefiting individuals who face geographical, financial, or personal constraints. According to Culduz (2024), one of the principal advantages of learning online is flexibility and accessibility, which allows learners to access educational materials remotely and learn at their own pace. This flexibility is especially beneficial for individuals balancing education with work and other responsibilities. Distance learning provides learners with the flexibility to learn at their own pace and on their own schedule (Rovai, 2002; Stacey, 2002) and increases access to education, particularly for students who have disabilities and those living in distant places or the backwoods (Kember, 2007; Bates, 2005). Flexibility is commonly portrayed as beneficial**,** without acknowledging that it requires high levels of self-management and access to enabling learning environments. In conditions where learners face economic or technological limitations, flexibility might not translate into meaningful learner participation.

2.3.2. Personalisation and Diverse Learning Resources

Distance learning allows for personalised learning experiences, as learners can tailor their learning to their individual needs (Keller, 2008; Siemens, 2005). Additionally, distance learning, particularly e-learning, provides diverse learning resources, including virtual classrooms, multimedia resources, interactive features, and online assessment, all of which cater to various learning styles and improve the overall educational experience. While the wealth of interactive and multimedia tools in online learning is a significant advantage that caters to diverse, personalized learning styles, their actual impact is contingent on

strong instructional design and the preparedness of the learner, which depends on positive online connection, participation, and engagement.

2.3.3. Increased Educational Access

Similarly, distance education plays a crucial role in expanding learning opportunities, particularly in developing countries. It offers academic inclusion for people who cannot enrol and receive on-campus classes on account of different constraints, hence becoming a feasible option to mainstream education (Edge & Loegering, 2000). While expanding educational access is a vital advantage, it is insufficient if not accompanied by comprehensive support, as institutional limitations and individual disadvantages can negate its impact.

2.3.4. Support for Lifelong Learning

Furthermore, support for lifelong learning is another significant advantage of getting educated remotely, as these types of systems offer continuous learning opportunities beyond traditional schooling years, enabling individuals to acquire new skills and engage in professional development. This is particularly relevant in present-day knowledge economies**.** Nevertheless, the realization of these benefits varies considerably, depending on institutional support and individual situation.

Despite the challenges associated with distance education, it has shown its significant role in enhancing educational access, flexibility and diversity. These modalities contribute to the democratisation of knowledge worldwide, enabling more individuals to continue learning regardless of their circumstances.

2.4. Best practices in distance learning

Distance education has evolved significantly, requiring institutions to adopt best practices that enhance learning effectiveness, engagement and accessibility. Research has identified several metrics in distance education, including:

2.4.1. Organisational vision and planning

One of the fundamental aspects is organisational vision and planning, where institutions must establish clear goals and structured frameworks to guide the development and delivery of distance learning. A well-defined strategy ensures alignment with institutional objectives and addresses unique challenges, such as student retention and instructional quality (Simonson, 2009). While this framework is useful, there is a gap in the literature regarding how institutions in developing contexts can actually implement such strategies, given significant resource limitations.

2.4.2. Course design and content delivery

Another critical factor is course design and content delivery, which should prioritize clarity, engagement, and interaction. The incorporation of diverse instructional materials, including multimedia resources and interactive modules, caters to various learning styles and enhances student comprehension. Additionally, Pratt (2020) agrees that the integration of regular assessments and feedback mechanisms plays a crucial role in monitoring progress and addressing areas that require. That said, assuming that institutions can smoothly execute these practices disregards challenges like limited technical expertise and inadequate training for instructors.

2.4.3. Instructor preparation and professional development

To maximise the effectiveness of these programmes, institutions must also focus on instructor preparation and professional development. Providing educators with training in online pedagogy, technological tools and student engagement strategies is essential for delivering high-quality instruction. Continuous professional development opportunities further enable educators to stay updated on emerging trends and best practices in distance learning (Nsiah, 2013). While this is broadly understood, understanding how instructors' expertise contributes to digital teaching and learners' educational achievement and engagement is of utmost importance from the learners' perspective.

2.4.4. Technical/student support

Beyond instructional methods, student support and engagement are pivotal in ensuring academic success. Distance learners often face challenges related to isolation and lack of motivation; thus, institutions should offer robust support services, including proactive communication, academic advising, and technical assistance such as dedicated helplines, online chat assistance, and prompt email responses. Ensuring technical support is available to learners can help mitigate technical issues (Hara, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2010) and improve access to learning resources. Studies frequently overlook that support services are central, not merely supplementary, to learning. In reality, weak support systems directly undermine learner engagement and persistence, particularly for learners studying remotely.

2.4.5. Quality assurance and continuous improvement

Quality assurance and continuous improvement are essential for maintaining the effectiveness of distance education programmes. Regular evaluation and assessment of courses, instructional methods, and support services allow institutions to refine their offerings continuously. Engaging stakeholders in feedback

processes helps identify areas for enhancement, ensuring that programmes meet established standards and deliver the intended learning outcomes (Simonson, 2009). Quality assurance mechanisms emphasize continuous improvement, yet research is scarce regarding the systematic adoption of student feedback in curriculum design.

2.4.6. Interactive learning, engagement, and regular feedback

Incorporating interactive elements, such as discussion forums and video conferencing, can enhance the learning experience (Palloff & Pratt, 2010; Whipp & Lorentz, 2009). Creating virtual communities through interactive platforms and collaborative activities can also mitigate feelings of isolation and enhance motivation (Nsiah, 2013). Live sessions and webinars further enhance the learning experience, providing opportunities for real-time interaction and clarification, and providing regular feedback to learners can improve their learning outcomes (Moller, 1998; Keller, 2008). While interactive strategies, such as collaborative activities and forums, are heavily promoted to enhance learner engagement and mitigate isolation, their effectiveness is often constrained by the necessity of consistent, high-quality facilitation and participant engagement, which may not always be sustainable due to institutional and individual challenges.

By integrating these best practices, institutions can enhance the quality and effectiveness of their distance education programmes, ultimately providing students with a more engaging and successful learning experience.

2.5. Theoretical framework

This research adopts Transactional Distance Theory as its core paradigm, complemented by the application of Social Presence Theory.

2.5.1. Transactional distance theory

Proposed by Michael G. Moore in 1973, Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) offers a foundational framework for understanding distance education, highlighting that educational separation is not merely geographical but, more significantly, a cognitive, pedagogical, and psychological gap. This "transactional distance" refers to the communicative and psychological distance between learners and instructors, which can create potential misunderstandings. The theory is built on three domains:

Dialogue, or how well instructors and learners communicate; Structure, which dictates the curriculum's flexibility; and Learner Autonomy, representing the student's initiative and responsibility for their own success. Given that many facets of online learning can be analyzed using these concepts, this framework serves as a particularly relevant foundation for this study. Specifically, issues such as delayed instructor feedback, ambiguous course instructions, and limited interaction reflect reduced dialogue and a corresponding rise in transactional distance. Similarly, the ability of learners to manage their own pace indicates increased self-direction. Consequently, the theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing how pedagogical design and communication patterns shape the learner experience.

2.5.2. Social Presence Theory

Social Presence Theory was propounded by Short et al. in their 1976 book, The Social Psychology of Telecommunications. This theory evaluates how learners perceive the social/emotional reality of others in virtual learning, influencing their engagement and belonging. High social presence fosters connection and interaction, while low presence leads to isolation. This framework is key for analyzing learner relationships, support, and collaboration in distance education. In essence, the interplay between transactional distance and social presence provides a powerful, combined lens for analyzing learner experiences. Transactional Distance Theory focuses on how the interplay of dialogue, course design, and student independence shapes the psychological and pedagogical gap between learners and instructors. Conversely, Social Presence Theory emphasizes the crucial role of establishing meaningful connections and emotional warmth to foster interaction in virtual learning environments.The integration of these theoretical frameworks effectively addresses the dichotomy of distance education, covering both the challenges (isolation, delayed communication, reduced engagement) and the advantages (flexibility, independence, peer-to-peer interaction). Therefore, this combined approach serves as a robust foundation for analyzing learner perspectives and determining effective, evidence-based practices in remote education.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach specifically guided by Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology to explore the experiences of distance learners at the University of Ibadan. Transcendental Phenomenology is appropriate as it captures the educational realities of learners, granting an in-depth understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and best practices connected to distance learning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). By focusing on participants' subjective meanings, the study aimed to uncover the essence of distance learning experiences within the University of Ibadan's context.

3.2. Population, sample size, and sampling techniques

The Participants were University of Ibadan distance learners selected for their relevant lived experiences. The target population was the 300-level Adult Education undergraduate class of the 2023/2024 academic session at the UIDLC, this class was selected because of its small and homogeneous nature. This cohort was purposively selected because they have gone through at least two academic sessions in the programme, ensuring they have adequate exposure to the learning environment. The sample size aligns with phenomenological research, which prioritises depth over generalisation (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In terms of gender, the sample was composed of seven females and 3 males. To maintain consistent, in-depth phenomenological insights, all participants shared the following characteristics:

- They were 300-level undergraduate students of the distance learning center (this means they had completed at least two academic sessions within the distance learning system)
- They were students of the Adult Education department enrolled in the Adult Education programme
- An openness to contribute detailed, firsthand accounts.

3.3. Instrument for data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews aligned with the study objectives based on the interview guide. The interview guide was premised on three themes: challenges, opportunities and best practices, covering issues such as technological barriers, motivation and isolation, flexibility and access and strategies for engagement, support and programme improvement. Sample interview questions include:

Section A: Challenges

What are the most significant challenges you face while learning at a distance?

What technical issues have you encountered while participating in online courses and how have you resolved them?

Section B: Opportunities

What benefits have you gained from learning at a distance?

What innovative or interactive features have you encountered in online courses that have enhanced your learning experience?

How has online learning changed the way you learn?

Section C: Best Practices

What strategies have you found most effective for staying engaged and motivated in online courses?

What technical support or resources have you found most helpful while learning online?

What resources do you think are essential for online learners?

How can distance learning programs be designed to better meet the needs of learners like yourself?

3.4. Procedure for data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews via WhatsApp messages and calls, focusing on the study objectives. Interviews made via calls were audio-recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes.

3.5. Method of data analysis

Data were analysed using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach, involving bracketing, identification of significant statements, clustering into themes and development of textural and structural descriptions. These were synthesised to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences, ensuring findings remained grounded in their realities.

3.6. Researcher reflexivity

Given the reserchers experience in distance education, reflexivity was crucial. To minimize bias the researcher consistently practiced self-refelction and bracketing all through the study. Futhtermore, reflective notes were kept during data collection analysis to ensure interpretations were rooted in participants' perspectives rather than personal preconceptions.

3.7. Ethical consideration

Participants were informed about the study's purpose, confidentiality and withdrawal rights and personal identifiers were removed and data securely stored.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This investigation presents a qualitative assessment of students' experiences in distance education, centring on the obstacles encountered, the possibilities it enables and best practices for improving their learning outcomes.

4.1. Challenges in distance learning

4.1.1. Financial Struggles

A prominent theme that emerged from participants' accounts was financial strain. Students face financial difficulties, particularly in affording tuition and sustaining their education without employment. One respondent shared:

"I find it hard to secure work to support my learning."

A vast majority of interviewed students reported that financial insecurity is a major barrier to completing their education due to unstable employment, this conforms to Chaloux (2008) conclusion that economic constraints is a major impediment for online learners. While at the surface level this appears to reflect the general economic realities of students, a deeper analysis suggests that financial limitations function as a structural barrier to sustained participation in distance learning and this indirectly widens transactional distance. This statement reflects more than personal economic hardship; it reveals the extent to which learners' educational continuity is dependent on their capacity to generate income alongside study. In the context of distance learning, financial difficulty extends beyond tuition payment to include the recurrent costs of internet subscriptions, digital devices, electricity and transportation for occasional physical engagements. This theme is particularly significant within the Nigerian context, where economic instability and high unemployment rates intensify the burden on adult and non-traditional learners. For many participants, financial stress directly influenced their ability to remain consistently engaged with online learning activities. Thus, economic vulnerability intersects with educational access, making affordability a central determinant of learning persistence.

4.1.2. Technical Issues

Another major theme concerned technological barriers, particularly poor internet connectivity, inadequate devices and platform-related difficulties. Some respondents noted:

"Possessing a technically deficient phone makes it difficult to connect to online lessons."

"Unreliable internet connections and platform glitches disrupt learning."

"I sometimes have difficulty logging into learning systems due to poor connection."

"I face network issues in online classes and struggle to ask questions that need illustrations or hands on explanations."

Technical issues, including unreliable internet connectivity, inadequate digital devices and difficulties accessing learning platforms, were prevalent, corroborating the findings of Itasanmi et al. (2020), as well as Akrofi et al. (2020). These difficulties unveil an urgent necessity for a resilient digital ecosystem. These experiences point to a broader issue of digital inequality rather than merely technical inconvenience. The findings suggest that access to education in the distance learning environment is mediated by access to reliable technology. Within the Nigerian setting, unstable network services, high data costs and inconsistent electricity supply collectively create conditions that disrupt learning continuity. Importantly, these technological barriers were often linked to academic anxiety and reduced participation (Thembane, 2024). Learners described frustration when they were unable to join live sessions, ask questions requiring demonstrations, or access learning management systems. From the perspective of Transactional Distance Theory, these barriers increase transactional distance by limiting meaningful dialogue between learners and instructors. When communication is disrupted, the pedagogical gap widens, reducing participation and engagement.

4.1.3. Feelings of Isolation

Another significant challenge was social isolation. Limited interaction with instructors and peers reduces engagement and motivation. Respondents expressed:

"Lack of face-to-face interaction hinders group learning."

"The absence of interaction makes learning tedious."

Social isolation was another recurring theme, with students expressing concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction and limited opportunities for peer collaboration. These sentiments reflect prior studies by Rovai (2002) and Stacey (2002), who noted that social disconnectedness in distance learning environments can diminish motivation, reduce learner satisfaction and hinder collaborative learning. Findings show that distance learning was experienced as socially and emotionally isolating, eroding the sense of community central to Nigerian academic culture. Reduced interaction weakened peer support and disrupted collaborative learning, affecting motivation and persistence. From a Social Presence Theory perspective, this reflects low perceived social presence, leading to academic and emotional disconnection. Overall, the challenges identified are not isolated issues but interconnected factors that collectively increase psychological and pedagogical distance, thereby shaping learners' experiences in profound ways.

4.2. Opportunities in Distance Learning

Despite the challenges, participants' accounts also reveal how distance learning created meaningful opportunities for personal advancement and educational inclusion.

4.2.1. Flexibility and Convenience

A central theme was flexibility, because Students appreciate learning at their own pace because it allows them to work and attend to other commitments. Some respondents noted:

"I get a job, master a craft while continuing to get educated without attending a physical school."

"I can access materials anytime and anywhere."

"I can read whenever I like during the day or night."

In spite of these issues, the research illuminated key benefits stemming from virtual learning models. Flexibility reigned supreme because it enables learners to balance academic life with work or vocational training and family obligations. Flexibility is often cited as a key strength of online learning (Culduz, 2024; Bates, 2005) and allows students to learn at their own pace and schedule, enhancing accessibility and convenience. Participants highlighted flexibility as enabling them to balance study with work and family responsibilities. This flexibility should be interpreted not merely as convenience but as educational empowerment. For many adult learners, women and working students, distance learning provided access to higher education without requiring them to abandon other critical life roles. In the context of Nigeria's socio-economic realities, this flexibility represents a transformative opportunity, particularly for learners who would otherwise be excluded from conventional university education. This flexibility reflects the learner autonomy component of Transactional Distance Theory. Learners are empowered to take control of their learning pace and schedule, transforming education into a more inclusive and adaptable system. However, this autonomy also requires strong self-regulation, suggesting that flexibility is both an opportunity and a responsibility.

4.2.2. Educational Accessibility

Another recurring theme was that education obtained remotely makes learning inexpensive and attainable. Respondents stated:

"It is flexible and this allows me to work while getting educated too."

"It enables me to pursue career and educational goals easily."

A student with a disability noted:

"Online learning improves accessibility for people with disabilities."

Students valued the flexibility and accessibility of receiving an education through remote learning, particularly persons with impairments and those in non-urban locations. This underpins the premise of Edge and Loegering (2000) and Kember (2007) on how distance education has broken down traditional barriers in receiving education. The findings further suggest that distance learning enhances educational access for learners who face mobility, geographical, or disability-related constraints. The testimony of a participant with disability on how online learning improves accessibility for people with disabilities is particularly significant. This indicates that distance learning can function as an inclusive educational model when supported by adequate infrastructure and responsive institutional policies.

4.2.3. Innovative Learning Features and Meaningful Engagement

A particularly nuanced opportunity emerging from participants' narratives relates to the role of innovative learning features in shaping meaningful academic engagement. Respondents shared:

"I enjoy discussion forums, webinars and group projects."

"Help desks and live chat support have been beneficial."

Incorporation of engaging components like chat spaces or discussion forums, webinars and virtual help desks encourages and elevates educational engagement. Users report that these tools have improved engagement, teamwork and group learning. This aligns with Culduz's (2024) view that e-learning is adaptable to varying cognitive assimilation while emphasising the value of various learning and teaching modes in remote education. Interactive tools such as forums, webinars and help desks were seen not just as technologies but as mechanisms that shape learning quality. They enhance social presence and increase dialogue, thereby reducing transactional distance. These features foster collaborative, reflective and flexible learning, particularly for adult learners balancing multiple roles. Importantly, they transform learning into a participatory community and help mitigate social isolation by rebuilding connection and belonging in online environments.

4.2.4. Digital growth and learner transformation

A particularly rich theme that emerged was learner transformation through digital skill acquisition. Participants expressed:

"Courses keep me engaged and prevent distractions."

"I use online programmes to stay informed and develop career skills."

"It enables me to operate a computer online and use a mouse for exams."

"Frequent use of technology has improved my technical skills."

"Before enrolling as a distance learner I did not use a computer before only my phone, but now I can use the computer to a certain extent because we use it write our exam."

These validate Edge & Loegering (2000), emphasising lifelong learning and professional growth through online education. Participants also reported notable gains in digital literacy and self-directed learning. Frequent engagement with online tools helped learners improve their technological skills, reinforcing earlier findings by Keller (2008) and Siemens (2005) regarding the role of e-learning in fostering autonomy and adaptability. Participants reported that sustained engagement with online platforms enhanced

their digital skills, self-regulation and independent learning. This highlights distance learning as a site of skill development, reflecting a shift from dependency to autonomy as learners become active managers of their own learning. Hence, Computer-based learning promotes self-reliance and lifelong learning.
Thus, the opportunities presented by distance learning extend beyond access to education, contributing to personal development, digital literacy and lifelong learning.

4.3. Best Practices in Distance Learning

Participants provide critical insights into improving distance education systems based on their lived experiences.

4.3.1. Technical Support

Need for Responsive Technical and Learner Support Systems**:** A key theme was the need for robust technical and learner support systems. Learners emphasized access to affordable internet, digital resources and trained support personnel. Respondents emphasised:

"Essential resources like internet, online libraries and research databases should be affordable for distance learners."

"Examination support personnel should be trained in providing appropriate non-medical help to students with disabilities during examinations."

Learners highlighted key approaches to support an inclusive, accessible learning environment to bring about academic success. Crucial to this success is the availability of technical and student support services provided by qualified and well-trained personnel. Students highlighted the necessity of comprehensive digital infrastructure, including internet connectivity, digital repositories, assistive tools and specialized support staff, especially for students who need additional assistance. These reinforce the view of Hara (2000) and Palloff and Pratt (2010), who all championed the integration of an all-inclusive digital academic system and assistance in distance education. Learners strongly emphasized the importance of institutional support services, including affordable internet access, online libraries, technical help desks and trained examination personnel, highlighting that effective distance learning requires a comprehensive support ecosystem. The mention of trained personnel for students with disabilities further highlights the need for inclusive learning support structures within the University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre. Within Transactional Distance Theory, such support systems function to reduce transactional distance by ensuring continuous access and facilitating communication.

4.3.2. Timely Feedback and Instructor Presence

Another important theme was timely instructor feedback. Constant feedback motivates and drives learners' engagement and achievement. Teacher guidance and actionable feedback were identified as foundational elements of high-quality remote education. One respondent suggested:

"Results should be published online or on departmental boards for student's self-assessments as it is done for regular students."

Consistent, prompt feedback was deemed crucial for sustaining learner motivation, aligning goals and evaluating educational performance. This is consistent with Moller (1998) and Keller (2008), they are of the view that feedback drives learner engagement. Facilitators' timely formative reports and feedback act as a guide in online education, help monitor development, foster self-regulation, enhance engagement and lessen academic apprehension. Participants viewed feedback not simply as academic evaluation but as a form of presence and reassurance in an otherwise distant learning environment. In qualitative terms, instructor responsiveness appears to function as a relational bridge that reduces the psychological distance between learners and facilitators. Learners viewed feedback not merely as evaluation but as a sign of instructor presence and engagement. This reflects both increased dialogue (Transactional Distance Theory) and enhanced instructor visibility as proposed in Social Presence Theory. Prompt and meaningful feedback reduces uncertainty, strengthens motivation and bridges the psychological gap between learners and instructors.

4.3.2. Interactive learning and community building

Another significant theme. Interactive methods enhance engagement and reduce isolation. A respondent noted:

"Group work encourages peer interaction."

Additionally, learners stressed the value of interactive tools in distance learning to promote engagement and reduce the feeling of isolation. Discussion forums, webinars, group projects and collaborative assignments were particularly effective in reducing isolation and promoting deeper understanding; this aligns with Palloff & Pratt (2010) and Whipp & Lorentz (2009), who noted that discussion forums, group projects and webinars create a sense of community and support. Participants also identified group work, webinars and discussion forums as essential tools for reducing isolation and promoting engagement. These practices align strongly with Social Presence Theory, as they foster a sense of belonging and collaborative learning. Interaction transforms distance education from an individual activity

into a shared academic experience. This emphasizes that interaction is central to the quality of the learning experience. Beyond content delivery, learners desire community, dialogue and collaborative knowledge construction.

4.3.3. Quality Course Design & Structured Content

Additionally, the importance of well-structured course design emerged as a critical best practice. A respondent noted that:

"Providing manuals and step by step instructions will help learners navigate online platforms and course materials more easily."

Learners emphasised the importance of well-designed courses with structured content, supporting this view are Simonson (2009) and Pratt (2020), who underscored the importance of intentional course design for engagement and comprehension, instructional design and community-building in virtual education.

Learners emphasized clear structure, organised content and accessible pathways, reflecting the structure component of Transactional Distance Theory. When structure is clear and balanced with dialogue, it reduces ambiguity and enhances learning effectiveness. Finally, quality assurance and inclusiveness were highlighted, particularly the need for trained personnel to support learners with disabilities. This expands the concept of quality beyond academic content to include equity, accessibility and institutional responsiveness. Participants' accounts suggest that quality in the online learning environment is not limited to course content alone but encompasses the consistency, reliability and responsiveness of the entire educational system. From the analysis, quality control emerged through concerns about structured course delivery, clarity of instructional materials, timely release of results, platform stability and the competence of support personnel. Overall, learners' experiences reflect a balance between structural constraints and personal autonomy, highlighting resilience and the contextual realities shaping distance education in Nigeria.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that distance education at the University of Ibadan (UI) is shaped by the interplay of structural challenges, institutional procedures, and student independence. Financial, technological, and social barriers collectively influence students' participation and commitment, while the quality of interaction, feedback, and course design plays a significant role in shaping motivation and connectedness, as explained by Transactional Distance and Social Presence theories. Despite these challenges, students exhibit autonomy through perseverance, adaptability, self-direction, and the development of digital competencies, highlighting the potential of flexible distance learning to expand educational access. Overall, the findings reinforce existing literature and underscore the importance of strengthening institutional support, improving technological infrastructure, enhancing interactive learning strategies, and fostering self-directed learning to ensure that distance education remains effective, inclusive, and sustainable.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, this study recommends that the University of Ibadan strengthen its distance education system through an integrated and learner-centred institutional support framework. Technical assistance should be developed into a tailored, multi-layered service that includes round-the-clock online support for platform, login, and examination-related issues, urgent assistance through WhatsApp or email, semester-start digital literacy training, and dedicated support for students with disabilities. Furthermore, student participation and connectedness should be enhanced through a structured feedback mechanism that ensures formative assessments are returned within 5–7 working days, final results follow transparent timelines, and feedback provides constructive, actionable guidance for improvement. To minimise social isolation, the university should establish virtual peer-learning groups, moderated WhatsApp communities, monthly student–instructor webinars, and peer mentorship programmes. Finally, course quality and institutional responsiveness should be continuously improved through mid-semester student feedback, regular satisfaction surveys, platform usability audits, and systematic evaluations of instructor responsiveness. Implementing these measures would provide practical directions for improving learner support, strengthening institutional policies, and enhancing the overall quality and sustainability of distance education.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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ETHICAL STATEMENT

Formal ethical approval from the institutional ethics committee was not obtained for this study because of its minimal educational risk. However, the research was conducted in strict accordance with established ethical principles for human participant research. Prior to data collection, the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time were explained to all participants. Verbal informed consent was obtained from every participant through a WhatsApp call prior to the interviews, with voluntary participation in the WhatsApp chat interview serving as confirmation of consent. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all phone numbers and personal identifiers were removed when compiling the chat records, and participants were referred to generically as respondents. Original WhatsApp chat logs were permanently deleted from the researcher's device immediately after export, and the anonymized chat transcripts were stored securely on a password-protected computer.

AI USE STATEMENT

The author declares that the generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool ChatGPT was used during the manuscript preparation stage to assist with language refinement, paraphrasing, and structuring of standard sections. All generated text was critically reviewed, edited, and verified by the author. The use of AI did not influence the study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or conclusion of the manuscript, and full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work remains with the author.

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