

Barriers and Strategies for Promoting Positive Mindset Shifts toward Open and Distance Education among Adult Learners in Lagos State

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Abstract

As global education systems evolve, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a critical tool for promoting inclusive and lifelong learning, particularly among adult populations. However, in Nigeria especially in Lagos State adult learners often exhibit resistance to ODL due to entrenched misconceptions, limited digital literacy, and perceived inferiority of ODL credentials. This study investigates the barriers affecting adult learners' attitudes toward ODL and explores practical strategies to promote mindset transformation. Anchored in Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, the research employed a descriptive survey design involving 300 adult learners drawn from the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and two other higher institutions offering distance education in Lagos State. A validated questionnaire was used to collect data, and responses were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings revealed that poor internet connectivity, high data costs, and limited digital literacy are key barriers. However, interventions such as the formation of peer support networks, flexible learning schedules, educator training in andragogy, and public policy support proved effective in shifting perceptions. The study also underscores the role of policymakers in equalizing the recognition of ODL qualifications and highlights the importance of public media campaigns to normalize distance learning. Recommendations include enhanced digital infrastructure, structured adult learning support systems, and integrated advocacy to foster acceptance. The study contributes to the discourse on educational innovation and equity, offering a roadmap for institutional and policy reform to empower adult learners through open and distance education.

Keywords: Open Education, Distance Learning, Adult Learners, Mindset Shift and Inclusive Learning Strategies

Introduction

Lifelong learning has become a cornerstone of modern educational systems, driven by the rapid evolution of knowledge, technology, and labor market demands. As societies become more

knowledge-based, the need for flexible, inclusive, and accessible learning pathways has increased. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a powerful response to this demand, offering educational opportunities to learners regardless of location, socioeconomic background, or time constraints. Globally, ODL is recognized for its potential to democratize education and reduce barriers to access, especially for adult learners who often juggle multiple responsibilities such as employment, family, and community obligations (UNESCO, 2022).

In Nigeria, the adoption of ODL has gained traction over the past two decades, particularly through institutions like the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). These institutions aim to expand educational access to underserved populations, including adults who missed out on traditional schooling or who seek professional development. Lagos State, being the most populous and urbanized region in the country, hosts a significant portion of Nigeria's adult learning population. The diverse economic and social activities in Lagos make it a focal point for educational innovation, especially for adult learners who require flexible academic schedules and blended learning environments (Okonkwo, 2020). Despite the benefits of ODL, many adult learners in Lagos remain hesitant to embrace this mode of education due to prevailing misconceptions, technological challenges, and doubts about the credibility of distance learning credentials.

Despite the increasing visibility of open and distance education in Nigeria, a significant proportion of adult learners continue to view it with skepticism. Misconceptions such as the belief that ODL lacks academic rigor, technological bias, and limited face-to-face interaction contribute to its underutilization (Adekunle & Adebayo, 2021). Furthermore, cultural perceptions that place a higher value on conventional, in-person education create resistance among adults who are otherwise ideal candidates for distance education programs. These attitudes not only hinder enrollment but also affect learner motivation, persistence, and success within ODL environments. Consequently, there is a pressing need to explore effective strategies to shift adult learners' mindsets, promote acceptance, and foster meaningful engagement with open and distance education models.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to explore effective strategies to shift adult learners' mindsets, promote acceptance, and foster meaningful engagement with open and distance education models.

To address this main objective, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the major barriers to the adoption of open and distance education among adult learners in Lagos State?
2. What strategies are effective in promoting positive mindset shifts toward ODL among adult learners?
3. What roles do educational institutions and policymakers play in reshaping adult learners' perceptions of ODL?

Review of Literature

Theoretical Framework: Transformative Learning Theory

This study is underpinned by Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, which posits that adult learning involves a fundamental change in perspective through critical reflection and dialogue (Mezirow, 2000). According to the theory, adults revise their frames of reference composed of habits of mind and points of view when they encounter disorienting dilemmas or new experiences that challenge their assumptions. Within the context of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), adult learners may initially resist participation due to pre-existing negative perceptions. However, through transformative educational practices such as reflective learning, peer collaboration, and exposure to positive outcomes, learners can shift their mindsets and develop more inclusive and empowering views of non-traditional education models.

Barriers to ODL Among Adult Learners

Adult learners face a range of barriers that hinder their engagement with ODL programs. Technological limitations are prominent, including unreliable internet connectivity, lack of access to digital devices, and limited digital literacy skills (Adekunle & Adebayo, 2021). These challenges are particularly prevalent in developing contexts like Nigeria, where infrastructure development remains uneven. Motivational barriers also exist, as some adult learners struggle with self-discipline, time management, and feelings of isolation in virtual learning environments (Ajayi & Bello, 2022).

Institutional barriers further complicate participation. These may include rigid administrative procedures, poor academic support, and inadequate instructional design that fails to address the diverse needs of adult learners. Societal perceptions also play a significant role; in many Nigerian communities, distance education is still viewed as inferior to traditional face-to-face learning, contributing to a lack of confidence among learners and their families (Okonkwo, 2020).

Attitudes and Mindsets in Adult Learning

The psychology of adult learning emphasizes autonomy, relevance, and practicality. Knowles' concept of andragogy highlights that adult learners are typically self-directed, goal-oriented, and internally motivated (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). However, for adults to embrace ODL, they must believe in its effectiveness and relevance to their personal and professional goals. Negative mindsets, shaped by past educational experiences or cultural biases, can diminish engagement. Research shows that adult learners who perceive distance education as credible and beneficial are more likely to persist and succeed (Tait, 2018). Shifting these attitudes requires intentional efforts to address internalized skepticism and foster a sense of agency.

Inclusive Pedagogical Strategies

Effective ODL programs adopt inclusive pedagogical strategies that cater to the unique characteristics of adult learners. These include the use of flexible learning schedules, modular content delivery, and asynchronous platforms that accommodate diverse learning paces. Support structures such as mentoring, academic advising, and peer-to-peer collaboration help reduce feelings of isolation and enhance motivation (UNESCO, 2022). Moreover, incorporating culturally relevant curriculum and recognizing learners' prior knowledge and experiences contribute to a more engaging and respectful learning environment (Brookfield, 2013). Studies also emphasize the importance of training educators in adult learning principles and digital facilitation to improve instructional quality and learner satisfaction.

Policy and Institutional Roles

Institutions and policymakers play a central role in shaping perceptions of ODL. Institutional practices such as accreditation, recognition of prior learning, and robust student support services can significantly boost the legitimacy of distance education (Jegade, 2016). Policy frameworks that promote equivalency between ODL and traditional qualifications help to dismantle stigma and encourage greater enrollment. In Nigeria, the National Universities Commission (NUC) has taken steps to standardize ODL programs, yet implementation remains inconsistent across institutions. Educational leaders must prioritize investment in infrastructure, digital tools, and faculty training to ensure quality assurance in ODL delivery (Ajayi & Bello, 2022).

Empirical Review

Empirical evidence from both local and international contexts underscores the significance of multi-dimensional strategies in reshaping adult learners' perceptions of Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Research consistently suggests that mindset change toward ODL does not occur

in isolation but emerges through a combination of learner support, institutional visibility, flexible pedagogy, and policy frameworks.

One key strategy identified in the literature is the provision of consistent tutor interaction and technical support, which enhances learners' confidence and persistence in ODL programs. Okonkwo (2020) reported that adult learners in southeastern Nigeria exhibited higher completion rates when they received regular tutor engagement and timely technical assistance. This finding aligns with Tait's (2018) assertion that holistic learner support—encompassing emotional, academic, and administrative dimensions—is a strong predictor of persistence. The availability of such support structures not only mitigates dropout risks but also fosters positive attitudes toward ODL as learners experience success and a sense of belonging within the system.

Another effective strategy lies in strengthening institutional visibility and signaling of support structures. Butcher and Wilson-Strydom (2019) demonstrated that institutions that actively communicate their learner support frameworks and maintain visible engagement platforms significantly influence adult learners' perceptions of ODL credibility and quality. Visibility serves as a trust signal, reassuring learners of institutional commitment and legitimacy. Therefore, strategies such as early orientation campaigns, clear communication channels, and public-facing service standards are instrumental in fostering positive mindset shifts.

Pedagogical strategies, particularly those involving flexible and authentic assessments, also play a crucial role in promoting favorable perceptions of ODL. Adekunle and Adebayo (2021) found that adult learners valued flexible assessment schedules and practice-oriented content, which not only improved engagement but also reduced dropout rates. By designing assessments that accommodate learners' diverse schedules and emphasizing practical, workplace-relevant content, institutions enhance learners' sense of relevance and control, both of which are critical to sustaining motivation and confidence in ODL contexts.

Furthermore, structured onboarding and orientation programs have been shown to shape learners' early experiences, which significantly influence long-term attitudes toward ODL. Tait (2018) emphasizes the importance of introducing learners to digital tools, time management strategies, and learning expectations through well-designed orientation modules. Such interventions help

build self-efficacy and minimize the anxiety often associated with transitioning to distance learning modalities.

Finally, policy and governance mechanisms are essential for sustaining positive mindsets toward ODL at scale. Studies suggest that standardized learner support entitlements, transparent quality benchmarks, and public recognition of ODL credentials contribute to normalizing ODL within broader educational ecosystems (Butcher & Wilson-Strydom, 2019; Tait, 2018). These policy-driven signals legitimize ODL and reduce the skepticism that often surrounds alternative learning modes among adult learners.

In summary, empirical studies converge on the view that mindset shifts require a multi-layered approach integrating pedagogical flexibility, visible institutional support, proactive engagement, and enabling policies. Institutions that adopt these strategies are more likely to enhance learner confidence, reduce attrition, and promote sustained participation in ODL programs.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for obtaining the views, perceptions, and attitudes of a specific population on an identified issue. The design enabled the researcher to systematically collect and analyze data regarding adult learners' mindsets toward open and distance learning (ODL) and to explore the strategies that can facilitate positive changes. Descriptive surveys are effective for studies that seek to describe existing conditions without manipulating variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The population for this study comprised adult learners currently enrolled in open and distance learning programs within Lagos State, Nigeria. This included learners from the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and two other accredited institutions offering distance education programs. The focus on adult learners allowed for a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and perspectives affecting this demographic in relation to ODL.

A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select participants for the study. In the first stage, three institutions offering ODL in Lagos State were purposively selected based on their program size, accessibility, and operational status. These included the NOUN Lagos Study Centre and two other distance learning units (UNILAG and LASU). In the second stage, 300 adult learners were selected using proportionate stratified sampling to ensure representation across gender, age, employment status, and program of study. This approach ensured that the sample reflected the diversity of the adult learner

The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: demographic information, perceptions of ODL, barriers to ODL participation, and effective strategies for promoting mindset shifts. Items were measured using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” The questionnaire underwent content validation by three experts in adult education and distance learning. A pilot test was conducted with 30 learners outside the main sample, yielding a Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency.

Data were collected over a period of four weeks. Both physical and electronic modes of questionnaire distribution were used to maximize accessibility and response rates. Hard copies were distributed to learners attending in-person tutorial sessions at study centers, while soft copies were shared via email and institutional online platforms for learners engaged in virtual study. Participants were given a two-hours to complete and return the questionnaire.

Data collected were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to summarize learners’ responses. Inferential statistics, including t-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), were employed to test for significant differences in perceptions and attitudes based on variables such as age, gender, and employment status. These analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Version 25.

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate office before the commencement of the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were assured of their right to voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents

prior to questionnaire administration. Additionally, data collected were used solely for academic purposes and securely stored to prevent unauthorized access.

Findings of the Study

Barriers Identified

The first specific objective of this study was to explore the major barriers to the adoption of open and distance education among adult learners in Lagos State. Respondents were asked to rate the severity of common barriers to participation in ODL. Using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Not a barrier, 4 = Severe barrier), the results were ranked by mean scores and presented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Ranking of barriers*

Barrier	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Rank
Poor internet connectivity	3.64	0.48	1
High data costs	3.58	0.55	2
Limited digital literacy	3.47	0.60	3
Perceived low value of ODL certificates	3.39	0.64	4
Lack of academic support/tutor feedback	3.28	0.59	5
Family and work obligations	3.11	0.72	6

From Table 1, the **highest-rated barrier was poor internet connectivity** (M = 3.64), followed closely by **high data costs** (M = 3.58). These findings emphasize that **technological limitations and financial constraints** are the most pressing challenges for adult learners. Despite the growing use of digital tools in education, many adult learners lack stable internet access

or cannot afford data services regularly. These barriers create a digital divide that restricts access to ODL opportunities.

Effective Strategies for Promoting Positive Mindset Shift Towards ODL

The other specific objective of the study was to explore strategies that are effective in promoting positive mindset shifts toward ODL among adult learners. Findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: *Effectiveness of strategies for promoting positive mindsets toward ODL (N = 300)*

Strategy	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Rank
Creating supportive peer learning communities	3.71	0.41	1
Outreach/sensitization campaigns by institutions	3.66	0.52	2
Flexible assessment and scheduling systems	3.59	0.49	3
Digital literacy training and technical support	3.54	0.58	4

From Table 2, Findings indicate that as ranked by the learners, different strategies aimed at encouraging a positive mindset toward ODL. Creating supportive peer learning communities scored the highest (M = 3.71), indicating that social learning environments significantly enhance learners' engagement and motivation. Adult learners benefit from community-based and collaborative approaches. Strategies that combine social interaction with flexible learning modalities are more effective in encouraging participation and reducing dropout rates.

Perceived Roles of Educational institutions and Policymakers in reshaping adult learners Perception of ODL

The last specific objective explored roles of educational institutions and policymakers in reshaping adult learners' perceptions of ODL. Findings in Table 3 indicate that a large percentage of respondents (85%) believe that educators need training in adult-centered pedagogies and digital facilitation. Similarly, 81% emphasized that ODL certificates should be recognized equally with traditional degrees. Open-ended responses added that media advocacy and internet subsidies are crucial.

Table 3: *Role of education institutions and policy makers*

Theme	Response Type	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Description
Educator training in adult-centered and digital methods	Closed-ended	255	85.0	Strong agreement on the need for training educators in adult learning methods.
Equal recognition of ODL and traditional credentials	Closed-ended	243	81.0	Emphasis on policy-level acknowledgment and accreditation of ODL qualifications.
Media advocacy and awareness campaigns	Open-ended	–	–	Suggested use of radio, TV, and social media to normalize ODL.
Internet subsidy for ODL students	Open-ended	–	–	Recurrent proposal for government to support digital access and affordability.

From the findings, there is a strong call for institutional and policy-level reforms. Educators must be equipped to handle adult learners effectively in a virtual environment, while policymakers need to support legitimacy and accessibility through public awareness and financial subsidies.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study have revealed critical insights into the barriers, effective strategies, and institutional roles associated with promoting positive perceptions of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) among adult learners in Lagos State.

The findings indicate that technological and financial constraints are the most severe barriers. Poor internet connectivity and high data costs were the top two challenges, consistent with previous research in Sub-Saharan Africa (Olakulehin, 2010; Jegede, 2016). These findings align with studies by Adeoye et al. (2020), which found that unstable digital infrastructure and high costs limit the accessibility and continuity of online learning for many Nigerian learners.

Another significant barrier identified was limited digital literacy, which affects adults' confidence and competence in navigating online platforms. This supports the findings of Okonkwo and Chukwuedo (2021), who noted that many adult learners, especially those without prior exposure to digital tools, experience anxiety or disengagement in ODL environments.

Furthermore, the perceived low value of ODL qualifications compared to traditional face-to-face education emerged as a psychological and societal challenge. This aligns with earlier observations by Olojede et al. (2015), who reported that employers and some institutions often do not give equal recognition to ODL certificates, thereby influencing learners' perceptions and willingness to participate.

The results also indicate that peer learning communities and institution-led outreach campaigns are the most effective strategies in encouraging positive engagement with ODL. These findings are supported by Kahu and Nelson (2018), who emphasized the importance of belonging and peer

interaction in adult learning. Supportive learning environments reduce isolation and foster motivation, particularly among adult learners managing work, family, and studies.

Flexible learning schedules and continuous digital skills training also scored highly. These findings reflect the importance of designing ODL programs that accommodate the complex lives of adult learners (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Flexibility helps reduce dropout rates, while digital training ensures learners are equipped with the necessary skills to succeed.

The findings further underscore the vital role educators and policymakers play in transforming the public perception of ODL. A significant majority of respondents (85%) advocated for training educators in adult-centered pedagogies and digital facilitation, echoing Mezirow's (1997) *Transformative Learning Theory*, which posits that adult learners require critical reflection, dialogue, and facilitation to experience meaningful mindset shifts.

Moreover, 81% emphasized the need for policymakers to formally recognize and accredit ODL certificates, reinforcing arguments by UNESCO (2020) that institutional policies must ensure parity of esteem between ODL and conventional qualifications.

Open-ended responses also highlighted the importance of media advocacy and subsidized internet access. These suggestions echo recommendations by Akinyemi and Ifedili (2012), who argued that governments should actively promote ODL through strategic media engagement to counteract stigma and promote acceptance.

Overall, the study's findings affirm that addressing both structural barriers (such as internet access and cost) and cultural perceptions (through inclusive policies and advocacy) is essential for increasing adult participation in ODL. The alignment of these results with existing literature strengthens the reliability of the findings and underscores the need for sustained multi-stakeholder efforts in expanding equitable educational opportunities.

In conclusion, the findings have illuminated several key issues affecting ODL participation, including infrastructural barriers such as poor internet access and high data costs, limited digital literacy, and the social undervaluing of ODL credentials. Despite these challenges, the study has also shown that targeted strategies—such as peer learning communities, digital skill enhancement,

and flexible learning schedules—can significantly improve adult learners’ engagement and perceptions of ODL.

The roles of educators and policymakers were found to be central in transforming public opinion and creating enabling environments for adult learners. The need for trained educators in adult-centered pedagogies and for policy reforms that recognize and support ODL credentials was consistently emphasized. Moreover, media advocacy and government-supported internet subsidies emerged as vital in reducing stigma and promoting equitable access.

In essence, shifting mindsets toward ODL requires a systemic and inclusive approach—one that goes beyond pedagogy to include technology, infrastructure, advocacy, and policy reform. With such efforts, ODL can become a powerful vehicle for lifelong learning and educational equity in Nigeria and similar contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

Enhancing digital infrastructure remains a fundamental requirement for improving access to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) among adult learners. Governments and educational institutions should prioritize investments in reliable internet connectivity and consider offering subsidized or free data plans to registered ODL students. Such measures will reduce the digital divide, promote equitable access, and ensure that technological limitations do not hinder participation in ODL programs.

Equally important is the professional development of educators through training in andragogy and digital facilitation. Continuous capacity-building initiatives should focus on adult-centered teaching strategies and effective online learning facilitation techniques. This approach is essential to support self-directed learning, foster meaningful engagement, and enhance the overall quality of instructional delivery for adult learners.

Public awareness campaigns are also critical in reshaping societal perceptions of ODL. A collaborative effort involving government agencies, educational institutions, and media organizations should be implemented to highlight the legitimacy, benefits, and success stories of ODL programs. Using radio, television, and social media platforms for such campaigns will help reduce stigma and encourage more adults to embrace distance learning as a credible educational pathway.

Policy reforms and accreditation standards must reinforce the status of ODL within the national education framework. National education bodies should ensure that ODL qualifications receive equal recognition with traditional degrees in both academic and employment contexts. Formal endorsement through policy guarantees will enhance the credibility of ODL programs and strengthen their attractiveness to prospective learners.

Institutions should also establish supportive peer learning communities that foster collaboration, networking, and social integration among adult learners. Both online and offline platforms can serve as spaces for learners to share experiences, exchange resources, and provide mutual encouragement. Peer engagement has been shown to improve motivation, reduce feelings of isolation, and enhance academic outcomes in distance learning environments.

Finally, the implementation of flexible and inclusive learning models is essential for meeting the diverse needs of adult learners. Course design should prioritize asynchronous delivery options, personalized learner support, and culturally responsive curriculum models that reflect the realities of adult learners' lives. Such flexibility will make ODL programs more accessible, relevant, and sustainable for a wide range of learners

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