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## National Open University of Nigeria Regional Strategy Plan

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22/2/2022*



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## Executive Summary

As the largest open, distance, and eLearning university in Nigeria and the West African sub-region, the National Open University of Nigeria is committed to playing a leading role in the higher education sector for the development of digital capacity, deployment of robust IT infrastructure, and ICT services through its vast network of study sites and growing network of partners in Nigeria and the sub-region.

The study sites are central to the institution's identity, mission, and vision, given the critical role they play in increasing access to learning, support, and research to serve the communities within which they are located, and to facilitate strong partnerships with industry among other stakeholders.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has given rise to a different set of knowledge, skills and competencies required for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world of work. A COVID-affected world has contributed to the mainstreaming of online learning and other associated modes of learning. With almost 20 years of experience in ODL practice and expertise in deploying technology to support learning, NOUN is poised to share and collaborate with other institutions in the West African sub-region.

The institutional regional strategy is therefore designed to ensure a systematic and more focused approach and guide for achieving the institution's key areas of focus and objectives, which are aimed at increasing regional student enrolment and developing digital capacity for technological advancement and development in the sub-region.

This document is to be read in conjunction with the University's overall strategic plan. It presents a summary of the institution's current state, position in the region, how it is viewed by other institutions, and where it aspires to be in the regional higher education space.

The key areas of focus of the institution's regional strategy align with its identity and mandate. They are: deployment of digital capacity in the sub-region, collaboration with other institutions in the sub-region; capacity building for faculty in digital education, digital skills for students, and institutional regional impact. Specific action plans and activities were identified for achieving each strategy. The institutional lead will oversee the implementation of the strategy through a University committee. The institution will support the implementation of this strategy from institutional funds as well as funds from DLI7 in the ACETEL budget.



## **I. BACKGROUND**

The National Open University of Nigeria is the largest single mode tertiary institution in the West African sub-region that is dedicated to providing quality education through the open, distance, and eLearning mode. It is a mega institution with an active student population of over a hundred thousand students (100,000) spread across the length and breadth of the country. First established in 1983, suspended in 1984, and resuscitated in 2002, the institution has garnered a vast wealth of experience and developed expertise in the practice of ODeL in the higher education sector.

In recognition of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) that is rapidly changing the future of work globally, and the need to close the digital divide on the continent, the institution seeks to contribute to the development of ICT knowledge and skills in Nigeria and the sub-region through its Centre of Excellence on Technology Enhanced Learning (ACETEL).

The COVID- 19 pandemic exposed the fault lines of education systems around the world, and Nigeria is not an exception. According to UNESCO (2021) over 1.5 billion students from pre-tertiary to tertiary education were affected as the pandemic interrupted learning for 9 out of 10 students globally. Online learning became the next best delivery mode as schools pivoted online. However, almost half of students face barriers to online learning. In sub-Saharan Africa, where 89% of learners do not have access to a household computer; 82% do not have access to household internet, and 11% are not covered by mobile networks, the pandemic widened the digital divide of inequalities and inclusion. Yet, the skills and competencies required of the 21st-century workforce are becoming increasingly technology-based. Although many institutions were shut down at the peak of the pandemic, NOUN was able to continue seamlessly with online facilitation and assessment. However, some learners were unable to access these services for various reasons including low ICT competencies, cost of data, poor Internet connectivity, and access to digital devices.

The university is committed to strengthening its position as the leading provider of flexible and quality education through open, distance, and eLearning in Nigeria and the West African sub-region as provided for in Section 8(2) (b) of the University (Amended) Act, 2018. The university strives for its provisions to be characterised by excellence and innovation in teaching and learning, research and scholarship, community engagement, partnerships, and collaboration in response to changing national and global labour market needs, and underpinned by principles of lifelong learning, flexibility, and learner-centredness. This is with the view to providing learners with a high-quality learning experience that equips them with a competitive advantage and the skills to contribute to national development (NOUN Strategic plan, 2013 -2017).

The task force approached its assignment by drawing on the university's previous and current overall strategic plan documents. To this end, it obtained ideas and information



from the following sources: NOUN strategic plan for 2013-2017 and, a draft of NOUN Strategic Plan for 2018 – 2023; policy documents including the university's draft eLearning strategy and policy; ICT policy, and Quality Assurance policy; Student IT readiness data (LCMS, 2019); published student Needs Assessment of NOUN Students Survey report (NOUN, 2020); regional strategies for La Trobe University, Australia, and Indiana University, USA.

## About the Strategy

This plan focuses on institutional regional strategies and should be read in conjunction with the institution's current strategic plan, which provides the overall strategic approach for the University as a distance learning institution and its operations in all its regional sites.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the context and learners within which the institution operates have made it necessary that the institution reviews its regional strategies. This strategy has therefore been prepared with the view to **becoming a world-class institution that is responsive and connects to every learner at any place, at their own pace.**

## Scope of this Regional Strategic Plan

The scope of this strategy will be national and regional. It will guide the institution and its units of operations on its regional approach and activities, as a component of the overall strategic plan of the institution. Specifically, it will strengthen teaching and learning, digital skills, and IT infrastructure within the institution and in the sub-region. The time frame for the plan shall be five years from the date of the approval of the strategic plan.

## NOUN Vision

To be regarded as the foremost University providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity, equality, and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers.

## NOUN Mission

To provide functional, cost-effective, flexible learning which adds lifelong value to quality education for all who seek knowledge.

## Core Values

The following key core values guide the practice of ODeL at NOUN and distinguish the University as a specialised higher education institution with a unique niche and clientele, different from all other universities in Nigeria:

### 1. **Equity and Equality**

We value the need to ensure that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities for all and therefore maintain an open-door admission policy and flexible delivery of instruction. We strive to ensure as much as possible the institution achieves equality in the facilities and services to facilitate and support learning in all locations, communities, and for all individuals.

### 2. **Accessibility**

We are committed to providing access to education to all segments, communities, and individuals in our society and beyond, equipping them with skills to improve their circumstances. In particular, we seek to reach disadvantaged and marginalised populations, including those living with disabilities, and open access to university education to all Nigerians and in the sub-region.

### 3. **Learner-centered support and engagement**

We adopt a learner-driven and student-centred approach to the provision of instruction and use all facilities put in place by the University to support self-learning. Open universities globally deploy extensive learner support services to mitigate the isolation learners usually experience studying at a distance away from any form of interaction with the institution, staff, and other students. A directorate of Learner Support Services oversees the institution's 103 study Centres across the nation, and the institution leverages the affordances of technology to continuously improve its support services.

### 4. **Flexibility**

We are committed to flexible approaches to instructional delivery and study while offering the opportunity to learn at a distance using blended learning modes appropriate to the learning situation, content, and context. The provision of access programmes for those who wish to enhance their academic readiness for degree programmes is an example of flexible routes provided by the University.



## **5. Partnership**

We promote collaboration and partnership with local, regional, and foreign institutions, organisations, and agencies to foster teamwork, sharing of ideas and resources, and develop professionalism.

## **6. Human Capacity Development**

We recognise that well-trained, motivated, and committed staff are our key assets and are therefore committed to their continuous professional development.

## **7. Multi-Modal Instructional Delivery System**

Our instructional delivery system takes into cognizance the different technologies available to learners to ensure maximum inclusion. To this end, NOUN adopts a multi-modal instructional system, which takes into account the limitations of the local environment, and utilizes a variety of such media and technologies as print, audio-visual, radio, television, and Internet (web-based instruction).

## **8. Quality Enhancement**

We are committed to the continuous improvement of our programmes, teaching, learning, research, and graduates. We strive to achieve and maintain excellence through the appropriate use of technology to support and improve the quality of the learning experience.

# **II. CONTEXT: CURRENT STATE AND ASPIRATIONS**

## **Who we are and where we are**

NOUN is a specialised university that operates in a context characterised by relatively low adoption of digital technologies to support and enhance learning. With over 500,000 students admitted since inception, and 101, 463 currently active students spread across 103 study sites in the country, enrolled in 106 programmes and 2,107 courses, it is a leader in the higher education sector in the region. The institution is the largest in the sub-region in terms of the student population, has the widest coverage, and has the most flexible mode of learning.

Globally, there has been a perception of open and distance learning as second rate. However, this misconception is gradually giving way to a more positive perception evidenced by increasing enrolments in open universities around the world, including NOUN. This is more so now in a COVID-affected world, where online learning is gaining acceptance.

## Where we want to be

The disruption to learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in the mainstreaming of online learning as many institutions pivoted online. The situation has placed NOUN at the forefront of sharing best practices leveraging on its experience in open and distance learning practices, and its extensive and increasing utilisation of technology to fulfil its mandate of widening access to higher education and reaching unreached populations in flexible and affordable ways. It is in this light that the institution aspires to play a greater and more focused role in developing digital capacity and in higher education in the sub-region.

Based on its nature and mode of operations, the University has garnered experience over the last 20 years of fulfilling its mandate of making quality higher education accessible to all. It has also built a network of relationships nationally, regionally, and internationally, which have enabled the institution to fulfil its threefold core mandate of teaching, research, and community service.

## Linkages and collaborations

NOUN maintains linkages and collaborations at national, regional, and international levels.

- (i) At the national level, working relationships are maintained with some Federal bodies like the National Universities Commission (NUC), and the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund).
- (ii) NOUN has also signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with some institutions including the National Teachers Institute (NTI), the Federal University of Technology, (FUT) Minna, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN), and the Administrative Staff College of Nigeria (ASCON).
- (iii) NOUN maintains linkages with other open and distance learning institutions and bodies including the Open University, United Kingdom (OU), the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), India; International Council for Distance Education (ICDE), African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). NOUN also collaborates with international bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Association of African Universities (AAU).
- (iv) The University has relationships with universities in the sub-region such as the University of Ghana, University of Gambia, Banjul, and LAWEH Open and Distance University, Accra, Ghana.



## **SWOT Analysis**

The university's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis) were identified in the University's strategic plans for 2013-2017, and 2018-2023 respectively. Information on the institution's strengths and weaknesses and its opportunities and threats contributed to informing the areas of focus of this regional strategic plan. They are summarised below:

### **Strengths**

- Extensive national coverage
- Cost-effective delivery of learning
- Flexible, accredited academic programmes
- Access to online support and instructional delivery via a dynamic Learning Content Management System (LCMS)
- Access to Incubation Centres in six geopolitical zones of Nigeria
- Proactive partnerships and collaborations with other open universities, regional bodies, and industry.
- Research initiative and networks e.g. Africa Centre of Excellence on Technology Enhanced Learning (ACETEL)
- Collaboration with COL.
- Regional Training and Research Institute of Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL) for capacity building
- Dedicated and experienced staff
- Support for Academics from other Institute.
- Basic ICT Infrastructure.

### **Weaknesses**

- Limitations in funding for large-scale digital and physical infrastructural development
- Insufficient academic staff and high workload
- Weak student digital readiness
- High attrition rates
- Insufficient digital infrastructural facilities for teaching and learning
- Inadequate responsiveness to learners' needs
- Sustainability of e-library database subscription.

### **Opportunities**

- Direct funding of the University from the Government.
- Funding from the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETfund) intervention.
- Grants from international development partners for teaching, staff development, and research.

- Capacity to develop faculty of other institution in online and blended learning in the region
- Large Alumni base.
- Endowment opportunities
- Collaborations and partnerships with industry and institutions to support university initiatives and share resources.

### **Threats**

- Dwindling government funding.
- Competition from dual-mode universities.
- Difficulty in employing and retaining highly qualified and competent senior faculty.
- Unstable electric power supply.
- Weak national Information Technology (IT) infrastructure
- Inadequate access of students to digital devices and Internet connectivity
- High cost of data
- Historic poor public perception of ODL qualifications.

## **III. REGIONAL STRATEGY PLAN**

The goal of the regional strategy is to leverage institutional capacity in digital learning to transform higher education systems through building digital capacity for quality online and blended learning delivery in sub-Saharan Africa. The institution will achieve its plan through building partnerships across sectors and countries within the sub-region.

### **Objectives of the NOUN Regional Strategic Plan**

The goal of this plan will be achieved through the following objectives:

- i) Facilitate effective deployment of digital capacity in the sub-region through strengthening institutional capacity in the following key areas: digital capacity for teaching and learning; and digital infrastructure and networking capacity.
- ii) Seek collaboration and cooperation with other institutions in the West African sub-region in areas such as research, and sharing of computing infrastructure.
- iii) Organise regional capacity-building workshops for faculty on online and blended learning;
- iv) Develop digital skills among students and professionals in the sub-region through short courses.



## **STRATEGY 1: STRATEGY TO FACILITATE DEPLOYMENT OF DIGITAL CAPACITY IN THE SUB-REGION**

Quality deployment and delivery of digital capabilities to the sub-region is hinged on robust IT infrastructure, and a critical pool of Faculty and technical support staff equipped with requisite techno-pedagogical skills.

### **Action 1: Action plan to set up infrastructure for training in the development and delivery of instructional resources**

#### **Activities**

- Procure and install multimedia production facilities for developing digital content, video recording, animation, production, and editing
- Record quality instructional videos
- Procure and install video conferencing technology for synchronous activities

### **Action 2: Action plan to train Faculty and technical support staff**

#### **Activities**

- Engage resident specialists in digital education.
- Organise regular online training for staff on techno-pedagogical skills and capacities.
- Train faculty members, pedagogical experts, and technicians in the design, production, and usage of digital educational materials
- Organise online workshops for technical support Staff on management and operation of multimedia equipment, acquisition, and post-production activities

### **Action 3: Action Plan to facilitate access to electronic Library and Database content**

#### **Activities**

- Identify key electronic libraries and databases
- Subscribe and maintain a subscription to identified resources
- Train Faculty on how to access and utilise the resources
- Share the resources with institutions in the sub-region under collaboration and partnership agreements.

### **Action 4: Action plan to enhance Digital Infrastructure**

#### **Activities**

- Set up a High-Performance Computing (HPC) infrastructure
- Set up Institutional Data Centre

- Provide computing facilities for staff and students through digital devices acquisition schemes
- Expand cloud computing infrastructure
- Set up a robust power generation mix (Solar, inverters, UPS, and Generators)

#### **Action 5: Action plan to enhance Networking Capacity**

##### **Activities**

- Design and build Wide Area Networks (WANs) covering the Headquarters, national and regional study centres
- Subscribe for high-speed broadband connection for all centres
- Enhance the Local Area Networks (LANs) infrastructure in all NOUN Locations
- Establish a university-wide Intranet
- Setup network IT hubs for interactions in Research, Innovation, and Development in Emerging technologies

#### **Action 6: Action plan to provide computer applications and train Technical staff**

##### **Activities**

- Develop/procure applications for learner support services, cybersecurity, examinations and assessments, Learning Management Systems (LMS), Administrative and Financial operations
- Deploy the applications
- Train technical staff

### **STRATEGY 2: STRATEGY TO COLLABORATE WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONS IN THE SUB-REGION**

The growing global connectedness in a networked world has provided a platform for enhancing collaborations across regional boundaries. Collaborations in mutually beneficial aspects hold huge potential value for extensive regional reach and impact.

#### **Action Plan 1: Action plan to collaborate with regional institutions**

##### **Activities**

- Utilise existing contacts from RETRIDOL and ACETEL to foster collaborations with Institutions in areas such as Internships, sharing of resources, research, joint workshops and conferences etc.
- Organise regional workshops for academic staff on how to write proposals for competitive research grants.
- Engage in collaborative research with other universities and research institutions within the sub-region.
- Encourage Faculty and Academic Centres to collaborate with professional bodies that share their research interests.



- Organise visits to selected Universities in the West African sub-region to explore areas of research collaborations.
- Organise short courses on current IT skills for faculty within the sub-region

### **STRATEGY 3: STRATEGY TO DEVELOP THE CAPACITY OF FACULTY IN ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING IN THE SUB-REGION**

To effectively deliver digital online and blended learning in the sub-region, Faculty need to be equipped with requisite techno-pedagogical skills.

#### **Action 1: Action plan to train Faculty and Technical staff at the regional level**

##### **Activities**

- Organise regular online training for faculty on techno-pedagogical skills and capacities utilising the institution's trained Faculty.
- Train faculty members, pedagogical experts, and technicians in the design, production, and usage of digital educational material
- Organise online workshops to train technical support staff on management and operation of multimedia equipment, acquisition, and post-production activities

#### **Action 2: Action plan to undertake Research & Development of digital learning tools**

##### **Activities**

- **Collaborate with regional Partners for research**
- Identify research interest areas in digital learning technologies, tools, and policies
- Utilise existing laboratories with partner institutions to undertake research objectives
- Provide incubation support for the upscaling of research outputs
- Test and deploy developed technologies

#### **Action 3: Action plan to share digital resources and infrastructure in the sub-region**

##### **Activities**

- Identify areas and partners for collaboration for sharing of resources such as computing infrastructure.
- Collaborate with regional partners for the sharing of digital resources and infrastructure.

## **STRATEGY 4: STRATEGY TO DEVELOP DIGITAL SKILLS AMONG STUDENTS AND PROFESSIONALS IN THE SUB-REGION**

In an increasingly digitalised world, ICT skills have become necessary for employability in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century and post COVID-19 world.

### **Action 1: Action plan to develop MOOC courses on digital literacy for delivery in the sub-region**

#### **Activities**

- Design competency-based curricula for MOOC courses
- Develop the content based on pedagogically driven methods
- Provide access to the courses to all students in the sub-region.

### **Action 2: Action plan to deploy short courses in the sub-region**

#### **Activities**

- Engage experts to design and develop key and current short courses in areas such as Computer Appreciation, Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, and Cybersecurity.
- Recruit participants across the sub-region
- Deliver the courses using hybrid training sessions regularly

## **STRATEGY 5: STRATEGY FOR REGIONAL OUTREACH**

With its experience in ODeL practice and its expertise in deploying technology for learning, NOUN seeks to extend its programme offerings beyond its national boundaries to the sub-region. Furthermore, NOUN has a critical mandate of reaching the unreached and marginalised groups to provide access to learning and skills for improved livelihoods.

### **Action Plan 1: Action plan to attract regional students**

#### **Activities**

- Develop language translation options for our academic programme offerings and learner support services to take into consideration other languages of education such as French in use in West African sub-region.
- Offer scholarships to deserving students across the West Africa sub-region, including prisons/correctional inmates.
- Liaise with the French educational and cultural institution, the Alliance Francaise, has very strong ties with francophone West Africa.



- Engage with networks such as Digital Science and Technology Network (DSTN) and African Digital Education Network (ADEN) of which NOUN-ACETEL is a member, and has membership from francophone institutions to facilitate networking in their respective countries. The institution will leverage ACETEL's membership in these networks.
- Leverage existing membership and active participation in the activities of the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE), Association of African Universities (AAU), Association of West African Universities (AWAU), etc.
- Mount short courses that appeal to prospective students across the sub-region.
- Participate in education exhibition fairs within the sub-region and offer scholarships to deserving regional students
- Advocacy through individual and online advert.

**Action Plan 2: Action plan to reach special populations (e.g. inmates in correctional facilities, persons with special needs, women in purdah, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), nomads) in Nigeria and the sub-region.**

#### **Activities**

- Design learning materials to meet the needs of special populations
- Set up mobile learning units
- Explore low-cost connectivity infrastructure for remote learners and learners with special needs
- Deploy flexible learning solutions (e.g. mobile learning) to provide special populations access to higher education and skills

#### **IV FINANCING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REGIONAL STRATEGY**

The institution will support the implementation of this strategy from institutional funds and funds from DLI7 in the ACETEL budget.

#### **V. IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING, AND EVALUATION**

The implementation of this strategy will be monitored to ensure that the stated action plans, activities, and intended objectives are achieved. A monitoring and evaluation schedule will be developed to guide the implementation. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and targets for each activity and timelines to achieve them will be set. The institution's Africa Centre of Excellence on Technology Enhanced Learning (ACETEL) currently has 53 regional students enrolled in its programmes and 89 regional participants in its regional short courses. Using ACETEL's regional student enrolment as baseline data, the institution projects a minimum of 20% increase in regional student enrolment annually and a minimum of 10% increase in regional participation in short

courses annually. NOUN will leverage the networks of its units, namely RETRIDOL and ACETEL, to extend into more countries in the sub-region.

The Institutional Lead will oversee its implementation through a University constituted regional strategy committee.

## CONCLUSION

This regional strategy has the potential to launch the National Open University of Nigeria into its next phase of reaching beyond its national borders in a more focused, systematic, and extensive way.

This regional strategy document has proposed **Action Plans** in areas that are core to the University's mandate: deployment of digital capacity in the sub-region, collaboration with other institutions in the sub-region; capacity building for faculty in digital education, digital skills for students, and institutional regional impact. These areas of focus provide the basis to drive the institution's strategic plan, and to enable it to fulfil its core functions of teaching, research and serving communities, beyond its physical location.

It is expected that the implementation of this regional strategy will enable the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) fulfil its mandate of widening access to higher education; providing opportunities for the acquisition of digital skills and knowledge; impacting positively on different communities and geopolitical regions across the country; and sharing its expertise in digital education to the West Africa sub-region.

