

Assessment in Trend in Student's Enrollment and Challenges of National Open University of Nigeria (2003-2023)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0228>

Received: 25 November 2025; Accepted: 02 December 2025; Published: 12 May 2026

ABSTRACT

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was established to offer accessible and flexible education. However, the institution seems not gaining wide public acceptance from inception due to its perceived low academic quality, unethical practices, and lack of parity with conventional universities, resulting in low interest from prospective students and parents. This study therefore, examined the trend in student's enrollment and challenges of NOUN from 2003 to 2023.

The study was a survey design method. The instrument adopted and validated for the study were profoma and interview schedule for administrators. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically,

The findings of the study revealed that:

the study indicated that most substantial enrolment growth occurred between 2007 and 2008, with a 93.33% increase that is, the enrolment rose from 105,000 to 308,000. The enrollment continued to rise steadily, with a notable surge in 2023, reaching 615,000 students.

the findings revealed that the most frequently reported issues were poor programe and policy implementations, inadequacy of media technologists for production and delivery of learning materials.

The study concluded that NOUN's establishment and growth align with its mission to democratize access to university education in Nigeria. This implies that NOUN is helping to break down barriers in education, making it more accessible to a wider range of people. The study therefore, recommended target student support services for more effective operation of NOUN.

INTRODUCTION

It could generally be inferred that educational pursuit has remained a social process in capacity building and maintenance of society for decades. It isa weapon for acquiring skills, relevant knowledge and habits for surviving in a changing world. Nigeria has always deployed education as an instrument for national development. Education is an indispensable tool for the total development of man and his society. It is also a potent weapon for the removal of social inequality, promotion of self-realization, good citizenship and adequate manpower for all round development of a nation (Oyesomi, 2018). This is partly why it is adopted as an instrument for accelerating national development in Nigeria.

Adeyemi (2011) opined that for development to take effect, a country must have a very considerable proportion of trained and educated citizens not only to act as medical practinoner, engineers, teachers,

agriculturists, scientists, and others but also for the purpose of creating a new class sufficiently large and strong enough to establish its own value of justice, selection on merit, flexibility, empiricism and efficiency. At the international level, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has encouraged its member countries to allocate at least 20% of their annual budgets to education (Obanya, 2000). In view of the recognition of education as a fundamental human right, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states that government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there is equal and adequate education for all. Also, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) declares education as compulsory and a right of every Nigerian's, irrespective of gender, social status, religion, ethnic background and any peculiar or individual challenges.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) states that commitment to education is the most important instrument of change in any society, and that any fundamentally progressive change in the intellectual and social outlook of a society has to be preceded by an educational revolution. To bring about meaningful changes in the Nigerian society through educational revolution, government then adopted, among other things, policies that would ensure equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels, life-long learning, and that at any stage of the educational process after primary education, an individual would be able to choose between continuing his full-time studies, combining work with studies, or embarking on full-time employment without excluding the prospect of resuming studies later on. In other words, the educational system in the nation was structured to develop the practice of self-learning (National Policy on Education, 2013).

Oyesomi (2018) unreservedly recognised of education as an instrument for personal and national development seems to have created the problem of accessibility to university education in Nigeria over the years. This is prompted by the increase in the number of prospective candidates seeking admission into Nigerian Universities which could not be met with corresponding increase in funding, facilities, equipment, materials and personnel. The trend of the problem of accessibility to university education in Nigeria from 2003 – 2023 is illustrated in table 1.1, which indicates the number of prospective applicants and admission offered during the period under review.

Table 1: Applicants and admission into Nigerian Universities (2003 - 2023)

Year	No of Universities	No of Applicants	No Admitted	%	% Not Admitted
				Admitted	
2003/24	54	1,046,950	105,157	10.0%	90.0%
2004/05	56	841,878	122,492	14.5%	85.5%
2005/06	75	916,371	65,609	7.1%	92.9%
2006/07	76	803,472	123,626	14.4%	85.6%
2007/08	95	911,653	107,370	11.8%	88.2%
2008/09	95	1,054,063	200,000	19.0%	81.0%
2010/11	104	1,375,652	360,000	26.2%	73.8%
2011/12	117	1,493,604	400,000	26.8%	73.2%
2012/13	117	1,503,889	500,000	33.3%	66.7%
2013/14	129	1,670,833	520,000	31.1%	68.9%
2014/15	140	1,700,000	530,000	31.2%	68.8%

2015/16	140	1,742,000	540,000	31.0%	69.0%
2016/17	144	1,800,000	550,000	30.6%	69.4%
2017/18	148	1,850,000	560,000	30.3%	69.7%
2018/19	153	1,900,000	570,000	30.0%	70.0%
2019/20	160	2,000,000	580,000	29.0%	71.0%
2020/21	170	2,100,000	600,000	28.6%	71.4%
2021/22	180	2,200,000	620,000	28.2%	71.8%
2022/23	190	2,300,000	630,000	27.4%	72.6%

Source: Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (2003-2023)

Table 1.1 reveals that in the 2003/04 academic session, there were only 54 universities in Nigeria serving a total of 1,046,950 applicants. However, only 105,157 students were admitted, translating to an admission rate of 10.0%, which meant that 90.0% of applicants were denied admission. This indicated a significant shortage of available university spaces relative to the growing demand. In the 2004/05 session, the number of universities increased slightly to 56, and the number of applicants dropped to 841,878. Despite the decline in applications, the number of admitted students rose to 122,492, increasing the admission rate to 14.5%. Although this suggested modest improvement in accessibility, 85.5% of applicants still could not secure admission.

The 2005/06 session saw a sharp decline in admission figures despite an increase in universities to 75. Out of 916,371 applicants, only 65,609 students were admitted just 7.1% of the total. This was the lowest admission rate within the period, as 92.9% of candidates were denied access. The drastic shortfall was largely attributed to limited capacity, infrastructural deficiencies, and stringent admission policies. In 2006/07, there was a rebound in admission performance. With 76 universities, 123,626 students were admitted out of 803,472 applicants, yielding a 14.4% admission rate. This improvement was likely the result of incremental expansion in institutional capacity. However, in 2007/08, while the number of universities rose to 95 and applicants increased to 911,653, the admission rate dipped again to 11.8%, with 107,370 students gaining access. The persistently low admission rate underscored ongoing challenges in the higher education system.

A major leap in admissions occurred in 2008/09, with 200,000 students gaining admission out of 1,054,063 applicants, reflecting an improved admission rate of 19.0%. This development was likely influenced by policy shifts and the establishment of additional private universities. Yet, 81.0% of applicants still remained unadmitted. Between 2010/11 and 2012/13, the university system experienced substantial expansion. In 2010/11, 104 universities received 1,375,652 applications, and 360,000 students were admitted (26.2%). The trend continued in 2011/12 with 117 universities admitting 400,000 out of 1,493,604 applicants (26.8%). By 2012/13, the system reached its highest recorded admission rate of 33.3%, with 500,000 out of 1,503,889 applicants gaining entry. This was due in part to the creation of additional federal, state, and private universities. From 2013/14 to 2018/19, however, admission rates began to plateau and gradually decline. In 2013/14, 520,000 students (31.1%) were admitted out of 1,670,833 applicants, and the following year, 530,000 (31.2%) were admitted from 1,700,000. The pattern continued in 2015/16 with 540,000 admitted (31.0%), and in 2016/17, the figure rose slightly to 550,000 (30.6%). Despite a consistent increase in the number of applicants, university capacity did not grow proportionally. In 2017/18, 560,000 students (30.3%) were admitted from 1,850,000 applications, and in 2018/19, 570,000 students were admitted, representing 30.0%.

A turning point was observed in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 sessions. For the first time, the number of applicants crossed the 2 million mark, reaching 2,000,000 in 2019/20. Nevertheless, only 580,000 students were admitted, yielding an admission rate of 29.0%. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem in 2020/21

as universities grappled with academic disruptions. With 2,100,000 applicants, just 600,000 students (28.6%) were admitted, reflecting logistical challenges and reduced institutional capacity. In the 2021/22 session, applications increased to 2,200,000, but only 620,000 students (28.2%) secured admission. Similarly, in 2022/23, 2,300,000 students applied, and just 630,000 (27.4%) were admitted. Despite the growth in the number of universities reaching 190 by 2022/23 the proportion of admitted students continued to decline, leaving over 70% of applicants without placements.

Overall, the data from 2003 to 2023 illustrates a persistent mismatch between the number of university applicants and the availability of spaces in Nigerian higher education institutions. While the federal government has made efforts to expand access through the establishment of new universities and the promotion of alternative modes of education such as the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), the demand continues to outstrip supply. Addressing this challenge requires more robust investments in university infrastructure, admission reforms, and the strengthening of vocational and technical education to provide alternative pathways for young Nigerians seeking higher education.

The provision of National Open University of Nigeria, as a separate and distinct institution to be established nationwide was appropriately captured in the 2004 edition of National Policy on Education, which stated emphatically that maximum efforts would be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to it. Such access may be through universities or correspondence courses, or open universities, or part-time and work study programmes. The Policy stipulated a system which encompasses education for all, education for life, life-long learning, lifelong education, adult education, mass education, media-based education, self-learning, personalized learning, part-time studies, and much more. It is all these variants now known as open and distance education that the Policy anticipated, without any limitation or exclusion, as long as the variance contributes to equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004).

It is on this note that the present study intends to investigate trend in enrollment of students and challenges facing National open university of Nigeria (2003-2023).

Statement of the problem

The National Open University of Nigeria was adopted by the Federal Republic of Nigeria to provide more access and equitable educational opportunities to those who otherwise would have been denied access to university education. Oyesomi (2018) was of the opinion that in spite of the noble objective of this initiative, the programme has not gained general acceptability in the country due to suspected low quality of learning, unethical practices and lack of parity of esteem with the conventional undergraduate programmes. Therefore, most parents and prospective candidates do not have interest in the operation of National Open University of Nigeria.

However, previous studies such as Emem (2023), Researched on the Changing Pattern of University Education in West Africa. A Case Study of National Open University of Nigeria; Muhammed (2023) worked on the pattern of Electronic Databases Utilization by Undergraduates in the Study Centres of National Open University of Nigeria; Amini and Oluyide (2020) Carried out analysis of ICT Competencies among Distance Learning Students in Selected Study Centres of the National Open University of Nigeria; Shehu (2018) Examined the Role of Distance Learning System in National Development: A Case of National Open University of Nigeria; In view of this, the present study therefore intends to investigate the trend in enrollment of students and challenges of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) from 2003 – 2023.

Research Question

1. What were the trends in students 'enrolment of undergraduates of National Open University of Nigeria from 2003 to 2023?
2. What were the challenges confronting Undergraduate Degree Programmes of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) from 2003 to 2023?

Purpose of the study

- a. To assess the trend in students' enrolment from 2003 to 2023;
- b. Identify the challenges confronting the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) from 2003 to 2023;

Significance of the Study

The findings will provide evidence-based insights for educational policymakers to design and implement more effective policies that accommodate growing enrolment figures while maintaining instructional quality.

As enrolment rises, the need for adequate educational media, equipment, and skilled personnel becomes critical. The study will help decision-makers understand how to allocate resources effectively to meet students' learning needs.

The research will emphasize the importance of training and employing more media technologists and instructional designers to enhance the production and delivery of educational materials.

University and college administrators will benefit from understanding how rapid student population growth impacts facilities, learning media, and overall teaching effectiveness—enabling better strategic planning and budgeting.

By highlighting the relationship between enrolment trends and instructional delivery systems, the study will contribute to maintaining high educational standards and promoting sustainable quality education.

The study adds to existing literature on educational technology management, media utilization, and policy effectiveness, especially in contexts experiencing exponential enrolment increases like Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted descriptive survey research design method. Historical research method was also adopted for the study. This is because the researcher assessed and explained student support services concerning National Open University of Nigeria. According to Osokoya (1996), historical research involves investigating, recording, analyzing and interpreting the events of the past for the purpose of making generalizations that are helpful in understanding the past, the present and to a limited extent, in anticipating the future. Historical researchers could make use of two major sources of information namely: primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are data provided by the eye witnesses to the incident. It is also regarded as firsthand information. The secondary sources are records or accounts prepared by someone other than the person(s) who participated in or observed an event. Secondary source is also known as second hand information (Abdulrahman, 2012). Both sources of information were used in carrying out this study.

This study being a historical research type employed both primary and secondary sources of information to gather data used. The primary source of information for this study included two instruments. The instruments used for the study were:

1. Profoma.
2. Interview schedule for NOUN'S administrators

The cross validity of the instruments was achieved and authenticity of historical sources were established in their own peculiar ways and these generally involve the rigorous dual process of external and internal criticisms. According to Osokoya (1996), the external criticism of historical sources affirms the authenticity of the data collected. It concerns itself with determining whether the document is a true one and not a forged one. The internal criticism establishes the reliability, accuracy, authenticity, and worth of the data obtained.

In validating the historical facts of this study, the data would be verified by comparing the secondary sources with the primary information. However, where there would be disagreements among the sources, the investigator would establish which fact is correct by establishing the basis of the overall plausibility from the stand point of internal consistency as well as independent corroboration, general compatibility and agreement of such fact with other known accepted facts.

The researcher personally visited the National Open University of Nigeria Study Centres for official documents and administration of questionnaire. Other places of visit were Federal Ministry of Education and National University Commission (NUC). With regard to the secondary data, the researcher made use of relevant textbooks, journals, articles, thesis and reports on National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). In history, data are usually analyzed by adducing facts and interpreting evidences available to the researcher. Therefore, the qualitative data obtained for this study were analyzed using thematic analysis to be in line with historical style of data analysis as stated earlier while, the quantitative data for the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics of mean, percentage, frequency count and mean ranking.

RESULT

Research Questions 1: What were the trends in students ‘enrolment of undergraduates of National Open University of Nigeria from 2003 to 2023?

To address this research question, data on the total number of undergraduate students enrolled at NOUN from 2003 to 2023 were sourced from the university's records at the Head Office in Abuja. The enrolment figures are presented in Table 4 below:

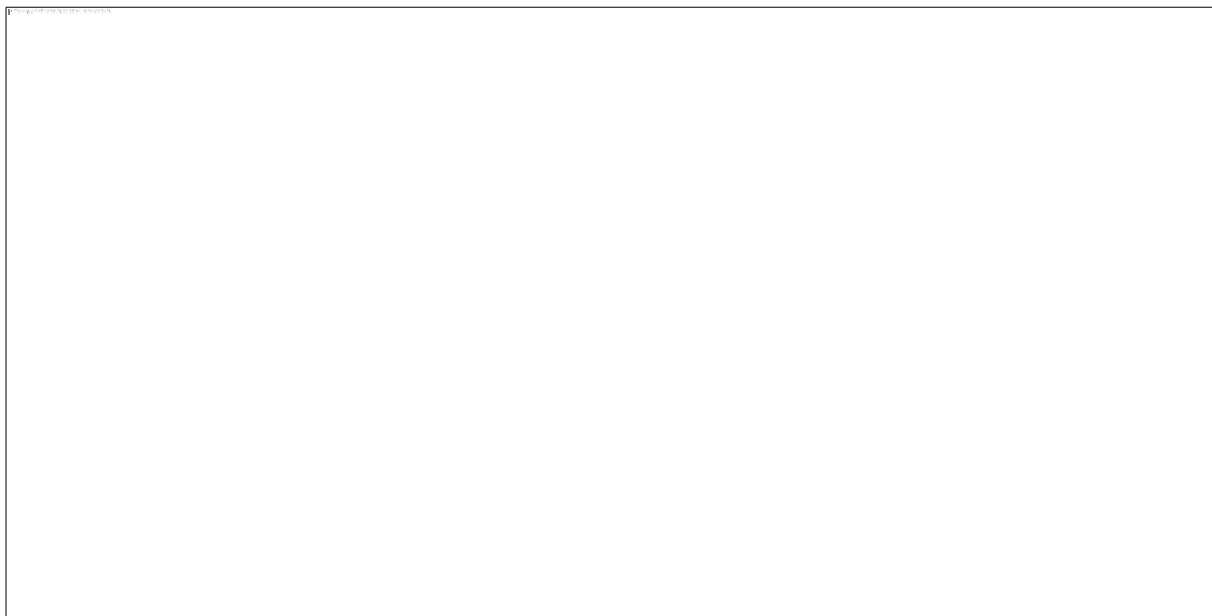
Table 2: Undergraduate Student Enrolment at NOUN (2003–2023)

Year	Enrolment	Yearly Percentage Growth (%)
2003	32,400	—
2004	33,000	1.85%
2005	42,000	27.27%
2006	57,759	37.81%
2007	105,000	81.74%
2008	308,000	193.33%
2009	335,700	8.99%
2010	343,028	2.16%
2011	349,322	1.83%
2012	366,836	5.03%
2013	379,965	3.56%
2014	393,095	3.47%
2015	417,000	6.07%
2016	426,305	2.24%

2017	441,000	3.45%
2018	455,694	3.36%
2019	470,389	3.23%
2020	500,000	6.29%
2021	507,926	1.58%
2022	523,981	3.16%
2023	615,000	17.37%

(Source; fieldwork, 2025)

Table 2 revealed an upward trajectory in NOUN's undergraduate student enrolment from 2003 to 2023. Notably, the most substantial growth occurred between 2007 and 2008, with a 193.33% increase, likely attributed to the university's expansion of study centres and programme offerings. The enrolment continued to rise steadily, with a notable surge in 2023, reaching 615,000 students. The line graph (figure 1) below further illustrates the growth in the number of undergraduate students enrolled at NOUN over the 20-year period.



Source: Saliu, (2025)

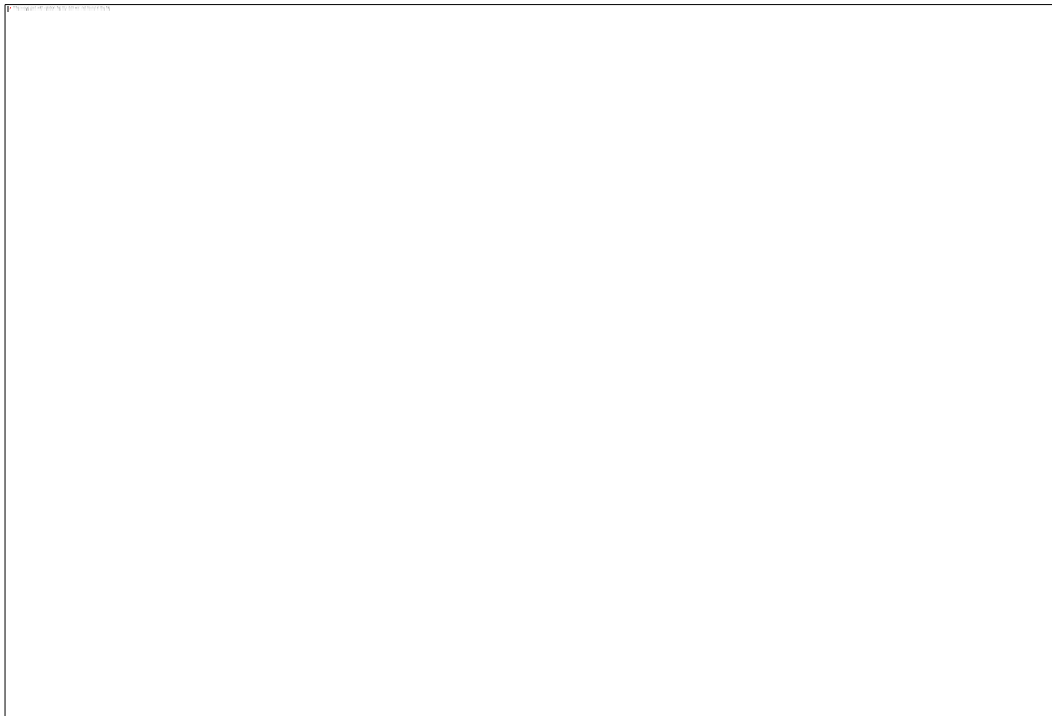
Figure 1: Trend Analysis of Students enrolment between 2003 and 2023

Figure 1 illustrated the growth in enrollment numbers between the years 2003 and 2023. In the year 2003, enrollment started at 32,400, which reflected a modest number. By 2005, a steady rise is visible, with enrollments reaching 57,759. In the year 2010, a significant increase occurs here, jumping to 308,000, which was a rapid rise compared to previous years. The enrolment rate in 2015 reached 417,000. Again, this maintained the upward trajectory. The trend persisted in 2020 and 2025 with estimated enrolment reaching around 500,000 and 615,000, respectively. This shows substantial growth across the 25 years. The trend line evidently lend credence to this, dotted trend line in the graph highlights a clear and consistent upward trajectory in enrollment over time. This suggests either increasing access to education, through the NOUN platform.

Research Question 2: *What were the challenges confronting Undergraduate Degree Programmes of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) from 2003 to 2023*

To address this research question, both descriptive (for the survey) and thematic (for the interview) analyses were utilised:

All the items addressing the challenges confronting Undergraduate Degree Programmes of NOUN from 2003 to 2023 were analysed using frequency and the result presented using simple bar chart in figure 10.



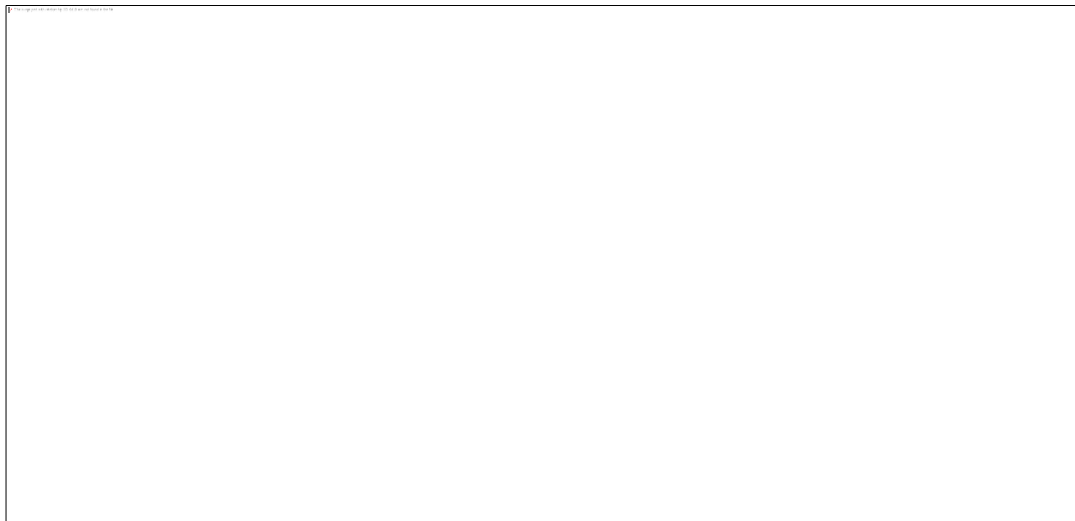
Source: Saliu, (2025)

Figure 1: Bar chart on the challenges facing NOUN from 2003 to 2023

Figure 1 revealed several critical challenges that confronted the undergraduate degree programmes of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) between 2003 and 2023. The most frequently reported issues were poor programme and policy implementation (144 responses), inadequacy of media technologists for the production and delivery of learning materials (138), and poor learner support services (103), indicating systemic gaps in operational delivery and instructional support. Other notable challenges include the inadequacy of professional NOUN teachers (99), delay of results (89), and high dropout rates (62), all of which point to inefficiencies in academic and administrative processes. Technical and infrastructural constraints such as erratic electricity (51), inadequate counselling services (46), and inadequate facilities (14) further hindered effective programme delivery. Low tele-density (9) was the least cited issue, suggesting it had minimal impact relative to other factors. Collectively, these challenges highlight the need for strategic reforms in staffing, infrastructure, learner support, and policy execution to enhance the quality and sustainability of NOUN's undergraduate offerings.

Thematic Findings

In addition to the survey findings, the thematic analysis on stakeholders' interviews across various study centres of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) revealed seven core challenges confronting its undergraduate degree programmes between 2003 and 2023. These themes were systematically analysed, visualised and presented in Figure 8:



Source: Saliu, (2025)

Figure 2: Thematic Map on the challenges confronting NOUN

As observed in Figure 2, one of the most prominent challenges was **Enrolment Instability**, driven largely by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and declining student interest in some departments. Participants frequently mentioned sharp fluctuations in enrolment numbers, with one participant noting that *“In my department, then, we were more than 300, now we are about 20.”* Another participant confirmed that *“COVID-19 affected the enrolment, so we have now like 20% reduction,”* illustrating how public health crises and administrative readiness intersected to disrupt student engagement. Closely linked to enrolment issues was **Student Financial Insecurity**, which emerged as a significant barrier to programme participation. Several administrative staff highlighted that students often complained about their inability to pay tuition or registration fees. One participant explicitly stated that *“Some of them complain that they do not have money,”* indicating that economic hardship was a recurring cause of non-registration or withdrawal, particularly among working-class and underprivileged learners, whom NOUN was originally designed to serve.

The theme of **Limited Student Support Infrastructure** further compounded these challenges. While some respondents acknowledged that orientation and training sessions occurred *“from time to time,”* others emphasised the inadequacy and irregularity of these support services. Counselling, exam preparation, and general academic advising were inconsistently available across study centres. This was reflected in comments such as *“Support services are inadequate”* and *“They need more facilities,”* highlighting the gaps between policy intentions and on-ground implementation. Another major concern was **Insufficient Infrastructure and Learning Resources**. Participants repeatedly mentioned that while facilities such as laboratories, libraries, and ICT rooms existed in some centres, they were either outdated or insufficient to meet the growing student population. A participant explained, *“We have ICT rooms, but they are not enough,”* while another said, *“The laboratories and libraries are all inadequate,”* underscoring the infrastructural gaps affecting teaching and learning delivery.

In line with NOUN’s open and distance learning model, **Technology Access and the Digital Divide** were also coded as a key challenge. Though the university has adopted digital learning systems and virtual examinations, these tools are not accessible to all students due to poor internet connectivity, erratic electricity, and a lack of digital literacy. One participant stated, *“We wrote virtual examinations and have continued with this trend,”* yet many learners are unable to fully benefit from such innovations due to unequal access to enabling infrastructure. Participants also expressed concern over **Result Processing and Administrative Delays**, which negatively impacted student progression and satisfaction. Multiple participants mentioned complaints about missing or delayed results, with one administrative staff member observing, *“Students complain of missing results,”* pointing to inefficiencies in the university’s internal academic management systems.

Lastly, **Reputation and External Pressure** emerged as a more latent but still impactful challenge. Competition from conventional universities and misconceptions about the legitimacy or equivalence of NOUN degrees

appear to affect both enrolment and public confidence. As one participant noted, “*There is competition everywhere,*” while another added that “*Academic disenfranchisement brought about the need for the university,*” reflecting broader tensions around the status of distance learning in Nigeria’s higher education landscape.

Overall, both the survey and thematic findings converge to highlight persistent and systemic challenges affecting the undergraduate degree programmes of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) from 2003 to 2023. The survey data identified poor programme and policy implementation, inadequate media technologists, weak learner support services, and result processing delays as the most critical issues, while the thematic analysis reinforced these concerns through participant narratives pointing to enrolment instability, financial constraints, infrastructural inadequacies, technological access barriers, and administrative inefficiencies.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDING

The findings from the second research question indicated the most substantial enrolment growth occurred between 2007 and 2008, with a 93.33% increase that is, the enrolment rose from 105,000 to 308,000. The enrollment continued to rise steadily, with a notable surge in 2023, reaching 615,000 students. This suggests an increase in both awareness and accessibility of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). This expansion in enrollment can be attributed to knowledge about the University’s flexible learning advantages, as well as improved access to its institutional programme through expanded study centres, enhanced online instructional materials, and greater outreach efforts. This aligns with the NOUN (2022) report, which stated that since 2021, the university has witnessed increased enrollment at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The report further noted that a total of 110,431 fresh and returning students registered during the 2022 first semester, reflecting an improvement over the 100,887 students who registered in the 2021 second semester. Specifically, newly registered students increased from 15,212 in 2021_2 to 17,956 in 2022_2.

Finally, the study revealed that the most frequently reported issues were poor programme and policy implementations, inadequacy of media technologists for production and delivery of learning materials. These are plausible factors responsible for enrolment instability and non active of majority in NOUN. These challenges are consistent with those identified by Oyesanmi (2018), who cited poor programme implementation, inadequate media technology, and insufficient instructional technologists as key issues facing distance learning institutions in Nigeria. NOUN (2013) similarly acknowledged that inadequate funding remains a major challenge confronting the university.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal a significant and steady increase in student enrolment over the years, particularly between 2007 and 2008, where enrolment grew by an impressive 93.33%. This upward trend continued until 2023, reaching a record high of 615,000 students. The consistent growth in enrolment reflects a positive response to expanding educational opportunities and increased awareness of the importance of education.

However, despite this progress, the study also uncovers major challenges that threaten the quality and sustainability of this growth. Chief among these are poor programme and policy implementation, as well as the inadequacy of media technologists responsible for producing and delivering instructional materials. These shortcomings suggest that while access to education has improved, the efficiency and quality of instructional delivery have not kept pace with enrolment growth.

Therefore, it can be concluded that enrolment expansion without corresponding improvement in programme implementation and technological support could undermine the overall effectiveness of the educational system. Sustainable educational development requires not only quantitative growth but also qualitative enhancement through effective management, adequate manpower, and technology integration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Educational authorities should ensure that programmes and policies are effectively implemented at all levels. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to assess progress and address gaps in real time.
2. There is an urgent need to employ qualified media technologists and provide them with continuous professional training. This will enhance the quality of instructional material production and delivery.
3. Government and school administrators should invest in modern educational technology, production studios, and e-learning platforms to facilitate effective teaching and learning.
4. Teachers and instructional designers should be regularly trained on how to utilize educational media effectively to maximize learning outcomes.
5. Policymakers should balance enrolment expansion with quality assurance by ensuring that the necessary human and material resources are available to support the growing student population.
6. Policies guiding educational media and enrolment should be periodically reviewed to align with contemporary educational demands and technological advancements.

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