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The Role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Development in Africa

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Abstract

Education is innately a developmental process hence the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL). ODL has emerged in Africa to provide training in higher education to those who had been previously denied access to education because of the historic colonial bottle neck educational system. ODL has made great strides in human capital development because of its ability to offer mass education to the great majority of African citizens and the flexible entry requirements of ODL centres have enabled greater access to higher education. The paper highlights how ODL centres have been the major producers of skilled labour necessary for industrial development and economic growth in Africa. The paper argues that with the emergence of ODL in Africa there has been a gradual shift from the exclusive, closed system mode of “privileged” access to education, towards a more inclusive educational model, which supports and is reflective of UNESCO’s goal of Education for All for the 21st Century. The paper clearly explores the contribution of distance education as a catalyst for social, economic and sustainable development in Africa. The paper explores the challenges facing distance education in Africa and also citing possible solutions to the challenges.

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Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that education is at the centre of all development initiatives worldwide. Education is innately a developmental process. The role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in development in Africa has been immense. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is both a philosophy of and an approach to education provision. It has progressively evolved from a peripheral concern to an inevitable developmental agenda that policy makers, education providers and employers have to contend with. ODL has emerged in Africa to provide the much needed training in higher education to those who had been previously denied access to education because of the historic colonial bottle neck educational system and because of the restrictive nature of conventional education. Through distance education individuals are allowed to advance themselves academically whilst they earn an income for their families thus breaking the barrier of distance and time. ODL has made great strides in human

capital development because of its ability to offer mass education to the great majority of African citizens. Rapid developments in ICTs, rising mobility of people, programmes and institutions across borders, and the constant pursuit for higher education are among the key drivers propelling the ODL agenda to high priority hence its central role in development. However, it is essential to note how ODL centres have been the major producers of skilled labour necessary for industrial development and economic growth in Africa. It is also fundamental to highlight how the emergence of ODL in Africa has resulted in a gradual shift from the exclusive, closed system mode of “privileged” access to education, towards a more inclusive educational model, which supports and is reflective of UNESCO’s goal of Education For All for the 21st Century. The paper looks into the contribution of distance education as catalyst for social, economic and sustainable development in Africa. The paper explores the challenges facing distance education such as lack of adequate ICT infrastructure and skills

in Africa and also citing possible solutions to the challenges in order to address them.

Definition of Key Terms

Distance Education

Correspondence study is largely regarded as the historical foundation of distance education from which two forms of distance education have emerged. One is the traditional correspondence-based distance education which is independent study oriented and the second is telecommunications-based distance education which offers the teaching and learning experience simultaneously. Distance education implies that the majority of educational communication between teacher and student occurs none contiguously, distance education involves two-way communication between teacher and student for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process. Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication that is necessary to facilitate learning. (Keegan, 1996)

Distance education has grown and diversified over the years. The more traditional term, correspondence education, gradually gave way in the 1970's to the term distance education or distance learning. This was partly due to a re-branding effort on the part of its proponents and partly as a result of the increased use of more interactive delivery strategies and a greater emphasis upon learner support. Other terms that have emerged during the interim to describe variations on distance learning include flexible learning, open learning and more recently, virtual learning. A broadly accepted definition for distance learning has been articulated by the American Council on Education which describes distance learning as a system and a process that connects learners with distributed learning resources. Although distance learning takes a wide variety of forms, all distance learning is characterized by:

Separation of place and/or time between instructor and learner, among learners, and/or between learners and learning resources; and Interaction between the learner and the instructor, among learners and/or between learner and learning resources conducted through one or more media; use of electronic media is not necessarily a pre requisite. It is fundamental to realise that distance learning is not necessarily premised upon the presence or participation of an instructor who imparts the content at a distance. However distance education is dependent upon a "system" and a "process" organized by a provider who is involved in the assessment and monitoring of the learning activity. It is distinguished, in this

respect, from non-formal and/or experiential learning that can occur through an individual simply accessing information or interacting with media. (Portway and Lane, 1994)

Development

Development is often mistakenly understood by many in a materialistic way. True development is holistic which implies that it should touch the body and the mind. However, true development should be the struggle to remove all that diminishes us at the personal and societal levels. According to the human development report (UNDP, 1994) development is defined as the purpose to create an environment in which all people can expand their capabilities and opportunities and can be enlarged for both present and future generations. While the UNICEF report (1994) asserts that the progress of a nation should not be judged by the splendor of its cities and buildings by rather by the well being of its people; by their levels of education, health and nutrition, by their opportunities to earn a fair reward for their labours, their ability to participate in the decisions that affect their lives and the respect that is shown for their civil and political liberties. So often the concept of development is often misunderstood, real development is about people not physical structures and materials. (Abiagi, 1994) Development should be measured by the level to which gender gaps and disparities are reduced. Thus development should be seen as positive social, economic and political change in a country or community.

Digital divide

The digital divide refers to the gap that exists between those who have access to the Internet and computers and those who do not. This may also be viewed at a global level as is in the technological gap that exists between the developing and the developed nations that is the north and the south. (Kalichman 2006, 523-537).

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

Any communication device or application, encompassing: radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software, satellite systems and so on, as well as the various services and applications associated with them, such as videoconferencing and distance and distance learning. ICTs are often spoken of in a particular context, such as ICTs in education, healthcare, or libraries

(<http://searchcio-midmarket.techtarget.com/definition/ICT>)

Why the Transition to Distance Education?

It is crucial to question the very emergence of ODL centres globally and more so in Africa. The factors that gave rise to ODL centres are necessary in giving the much needed insight into the role that distance education plays in development. It is generally agreed by most academicians that the constant need to overcome skills shortages by keeping employees on the job while they received training was one of the major factors. Thus conventional classroom universities and colleges could no longer suffice in the need to gain and update skills without the possible loss of a job and income whilst disrupting productivity. Distance education was able to address the dual need of studying and earning/working. This remains one of the major magnets of distance education especially when considering adult learners who form the majority of ODL students.

Higher education and in particular university education in Africa has, in fact, evolved from an elitist pursuit into a mass system. The pressure of numbers is one thing that conventional institutions are not equipped to cope with. Their capacities can and could never be raised to respond to the ever-increasing demand. After independence there was a sudden rise in demand for higher education which had developed over time because of the restrictive colonial bottle neck educational system. This demand for higher education could only be addressed through an alternative education system in the form of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system (Kanwar, 2008)

In Africa the untenable of costs of conventional education in higher education meant that an affordable system of mass education had to be created. ODL was to emerge because of its low cost approach to education meant that greater access was to be afforded to a relatively large majority. In addition the study mode of allowing individuals to study whilst they fulfilled their professional duties meant that individuals could afford to pay tuitions since there was no loss in income. Great strides have been made in providing material and human resources for education in Sub-Saharan Africa. But no country has yet fulfilled the promise of providing access to education for all its citizens. It is within this context, therefore, that distance education offers the hope of reaching the unreached and allowing a second chance to those left behind because they could not afford the time or money to attend school or because there was no school for them to attend.

But the extent to which ODL, as currently structured, managed and delivered, broadens access to the

disadvantaged (especially school leavers who are unable to access regular universities, and women who would otherwise be tied down by domestic responsibilities) or merely enhances opportunities for the already advantaged, is a subject of intense debate and research. Undeniably, many ODL institutions in Africa have and are making great strides in expanding access to higher education by establishing regional learning centers in geographically dispersed areas and by offering e-learning programmes. But this model of provision and expansion is skewed in favour of urban areas, as regional learning centres are often located in mainly urban centres where the majority of the residents are already relatively advantaged. The real rural areas are often left out, and this for good, but not sufficiently credible reasons. It is argued that this is where you will get electricity, buildings, internet connectivity and related infrastructure. But it can be argued that while this is reasonable, it tends to indirectly widen and perpetuate inequality.

No country can, however, entirely neglect its leftouts, dropouts and—as Kenneth Kaunda defined them in 1973—its squeeze-outs—the millions of adolescents and adults who are half educated and do not possess the requisite technical skills to participate actively in this knowledge driven 21st century, but who however, form the bulk of the present workforce and population.

It is in this context that distance education has assumed importance especially in Africa. It is seen not only as a complement to the formal education system, but also as a low cost alternative to expanding conventional education. Ministries of education see it as an important or even necessary tool for national development—very different from its position in richer countries as a useful adjunct to conventional education. In the rich western world everyone has access to formal education at all levels.

One of the reasons for the prominence of ODL in Africa has been in its ability to expand access to and widening participation in higher education which was previously limited because of the limited numbers conventional higher education institutions could accommodate. The emphasis on openness and flexibility as hallmarks of ODL provision in the mitigation of constraints of time, space and place which come with traditional university education also helped ODL centres to become the zeitgeist of the 21st century education system. This has all but ensured that distance education has become a dependable tool or enabler for the massification of higher education.

The swift transition from conventional education to distance education can be explained by the sudden shift in values. With the effects of globalisation there have been changing values in the manner in which people want to learn and where they can learn. The change in values has meant that individuals have more choice in deciding where they can learn without be limited by geography, individuals now desire for more freedom in deciding the pace at which they can learn and also the environment in which they can learn, thus individuals can learn without the ignominy of classroom embarrassment as is the case with traditional education. Thus distance education accommodates these changing values in the modern day prospective students in ways that the traditional university system cannot.

It is as a result of these several reasons that ODL has been gaining more prominence especially as a means of providing higher education especially in developing or resource poor nations. ODL has allowed for the scaling up of higher education globally. Since distance education has been gaining more and more ground, conventional universities are now being forced to mutate and become flexible in allowing individuals to study at a distance in one way or the other. The result has been that some conventional universities have began to provide distance study modes in the form of block release programs and parallel programs which have relaxed entry qualifications and which allow students to attend classes at flexible times. It is conceivable in the not so distant future to see universities in Africa offering both conventional and distance education forms of study as with their counter parts in developed western countries as distance education continues to grow in leaps and bounds.

The Nature & Structure of ODL in Africa.

Most ODL institutions in Africa have regional centres or offices through which they contact their students and prospective students. One of the major functions and responsibilities of Regional centres is to provide administrative support to students and prospective students. The administrative and student support services are in the form of library service provision, tutorial facilitation, student registration, student advisory and counselling services and assignment handling. In attempting to meet the administrative needs while facilitating learning, ODL institutions have tried to use a variety of media to accomplish their teaching and administrative functions.

Most distance learning programs do not rely on a single technology but rather integrate several

technologies and methods to create more comprehensive and flexible delivery systems. Distance learning models can be broadly separated into three categories: distributed classroom, independent study and blended delivery. The majority of distance education universities in Africa use about two forms of media for distance education delivery that is the print media in the form of course modules and internet based training in the form of on line tutors and instructors usually utilised by international students. High technology computer based systems are expensive thus putting them beyond the reach of many African ODL centres and in addition most African countries do not have the technological infrastructural capacity to support high computer technology based ODL delivery modes. However, such technology has great potential in enhancing learning because of its increased interactivity and its ability to break the barrier of distance and time.

The Importance of Distance Education to Development.

There is a growing recognition that the skills and knowledge of the workforce are important determinants of economic and social progress within an emerging global economy. Due to the high costs and inefficiencies associated with traditional forms of classroom-based training many national governments and international agencies are actively seeking new ways to improve the productivity of education and training systems through distance learning. There is also evidence that some policy makers and practitioners now regard distance education as a means to “leap frog” incremental improvements in “bricks and mortar” educational systems and introduce transformational learning strategies based upon investments in telecommunications and information technology infrastructure. For many regions, including Sub Sahara Africa, it is far from apparent that such strategies are feasible especially in light of the digital divide. Some novel forms of distance education, particularly in the developed economies, are intensively technology-based, requiring advanced telecommunications networks and hardware platforms. Other very effective models have been implemented using relatively low levels of technology such as print media in Africa as modes of instruction. While distance education models have been most evident in the higher education and corporate training arenas, their use in vocational education and training, in both developed and developing economies, is expanding. Despite the varying modes and levels of technology utilisation between the developed and developing nations, it is quite evident that distance education is playing a key

role in human capital development of professionals in various sectors in Africa. The ability of distance education to train professionals to be more competent whilst keeping key personnel at work, allows for production to continue unhindered thereby enhancing development.

Globally, virtually all countries are facing the triple challenge of expanding access and ensuring equity, especially in higher education. While the challenge is global in nature, its impact is particularly evident in Africa, which has some of the world's highest capacity development needs and a massive demand for tertiary education. The tertiary gross enrolment ratio for Sub-Saharan Africa is only about 5.6 percent, compared to 26 percent for East Asia and the Pacific, and 71 percent for North America and Western Europe¹. To date, no African country has achieved the UNESCO-defined level of 25 percent participation in Higher Education, and on average, African universities have a shortfall of 60 percent of what could be termed as excellent researchers and teachers. The shortage of teachers at the lower levels of education is even more acute. The median percentage of trained primary school teachers was less than 80 percent in sub-Saharan Africa in 2005. Higher education, a struggling sector, is expected to train the needed number of teachers for the basic and post basic levels of education in Africa, and thus contribute to the achievement of Universal Primary Education which is one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These challenges prevail against the backdrop of Africa's commitment to attainment of the MDGs, and the African Union (AU) vision as mapped out in *The Second Decade of Education for Africa: 2006-2015 Plan of Action*. (Garret, Matkin & Kumar, 2005). However, the vision is unlikely to be achieved if African universities and other higher education institutions, which are principal custodians of knowledge production and social re-engineering, stick to traditional modes of education and training delivery. This indicates a growing need to expand ODL if the training of adequate human resources to drive the development agenda is to be achieved. Traditional universities can no longer remain insular, blinkered and straitjacketed in the wake of the changing trends and values towards a more flexible and accommodating higher education system. ODL institutions are not coping with the ever increasing demand for university education because of government under funding. In some instances they are only a handful or only a single ODL institution in a country as is the case with a country like Zimbabwe. African governments and universities should wake up from their slumber and revamp

higher education systems and put ODL at the center in light of the potential role it plays in development. Education is at the center of all development initiatives and ODL has the capacity to produce and develop enough human resources to drive and spearhead development in Africa.

There is also growing evidence that the quality of higher education delivered is inextricably linked to the attainment of the MDGs. As has been rightly observed, training of high-level and adaptable labour force in higher education translates into building social capital and expanding opportunities for employability and social mobility, while the application of research and development in higher education leads to improvement in the provision of basic needs essential for enhancing welfare levels of poor families. (Insung, 2005). However, traditional universities and residential modes of higher education delivery have proved incapable of meeting the ever increasing demand for greater educational opportunities, accessibility, flexibility, and affordability by themselves. It is only through distance education that the role of education may be felt in development.

The benefits of ODL illuminated above have led to increased awareness of, and appreciation for the potential of (ODL) in increasing access to higher education, ensuring continuous turnout of quality graduates and accelerating attainment of the AU vision and the MDGs putting distance education at the crux of all development issues. The potential contributions of distance education to Africa's sustainable development have been highlighted by various players, stakeholders and policy documents, including: The first ever All Africa Ministers of Education Conference on ODL (2004); the African Union Second Decade of Education on Africa: 2006-2015 (AU Plan of Action); the Inaugural ACDE Conference and General Assembly (2005); the Final Report of the Regional Conference on Higher Education in Africa (CRESA) on New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research: Strategies for Change and Development (2006); the Abuja Declaration on Sustainable Development in Africa: The Role of Higher Education (2009), adopted at the 12th General Conference of AAU; and Communiqué of the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (2009).

The MINEDAF VIII meeting held in Dar es Salaam (December, 2002) highlighted the importance of open learning and distance education in helping to solve Africa's challenges of social dislocation, poverty, conflict, and marginalisation, as well as achievement of the Continent's human development goals. At this

meeting, the Ministers agreed to a first ever all Africa Ministers Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education, which was later hosted and convened by South Africa in Cape Town (February, 2004). The Ministers identified two major challenges to distance education in Africa. (Kaberia, Mutinda & Kobia, 2007). First, it is essential to manage access, quality, and cost in order to ensure affordability and learner success. Second, it is necessary to ensure quality in distance education provision. One key strategy recommended for tackling the first challenge was to encourage partnership and collaboration in design and development of programmes and courseware across African borders, as well as across institutions in use of under-used, decentralised facilities such as learning and ICT centres. Regarding the second challenge, the key strategy recommended by the Ministers was to build a common understanding of quality in distance education through broad consultation, introduce mechanisms for programme accreditation and institutional audits against sound criteria, ensure collaboration and partnerships in setting quality criteria, and promote internal and external forms of quality assurance in order to prevent poor practice and to stimulate innovation.

The Abuja Declaration on Sustainable Development (2009) and the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (2009) also reiterated and reinforced the critical role of distance and online education in accelerating Africa's development and attainment of the MDGs. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26, paragraph 1), access to basic education is not a privilege, but a basic human right, and higher education is supposed to be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Moreover, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights demand that all children, young people and adults have the human right to benefit from an education that meets their basic learning needs, an education that includes learning to know, to do, to live together, and to be. Although many countries in Africa continue to face the challenge of defining the meaning, purpose and content of basic education in the context of a fast changing world, there is no doubt of the potential role that ODL plays in enhancing access to higher education especially in Africa where there are still remnants of the colonial legacy of restricted access to education.

Distance education is believed by many to hold promise in addressing critical problems facing skills development at present, namely: a lack of qualified instructors, the need to greatly increase the delivery

of skills training on a wide scale, and the need to deliver training at much lower unit costs owing to constraints on financing hence the pivotal role played by ODL in the development of Africa.

Challenges and Possible Solutions to the Problems Confronting ODL Centres in Africa.

The rapid growth of distance education has resulted in the emergence of challenges and issues that can, if not well managed, impede upon the ability of ODL to have an enhanced role in development. Distance educators still must confront a traditional misconception and myth that distance education is an inappropriate methodology for imparting vocational and technical skills. Still, distance education is generally regarded as most appropriate for post-secondary technical level studies rather than manual skills at the vocational level. Technical-level studies often comprise much greater cognitive and theoretical components that better lend themselves to distance learning methodology. Also, students at the technical level tend to have higher levels educational attainment and are better prepared to undertake self-study. The challenge of providing manual / psychomotor skills can be overcome through blended program models that incorporate practical workshop-based components.

There are also concerns among many potential participants that distance learning is a "second best" option and is therefore believed to play second fiddle to conventional classroom based modes of higher education delivery. African higher education ministries should come up with mechanism to standardize and monitor the quality of ODL programmes. More often than not ODL centres have been monitored and evaluated while basing on the standards prescribed for conventional universities. This has resulted in unfair criterions being used to judge ODL centres hence the resultant misconceptions. There is need for a fair framework upon which quality issues in ODL may be measured and be grounded on.

There is, at present, highly inequitable access to information and telecommunications technologies between the developed and developing worlds and even within the more advanced economies. The digital divide is most pronounced between the developing and the more developed countries but also manifests itself within more advanced economies along income lines, levels of educational attainment, between small and mid-large sized firms, and between rural and urban areas. Providing equitable access to technology will be essential if one accepts

the propositions that increasing access to computers and high speed networks will be a fundamental prerequisite for participation in the new technology-based learning models, and that training and education are the cornerstones for economic and social development. The potential of distance education to expand access to training will be increasingly predicated upon finding ways to democratize access to technology. There are widely expressed fears that, if this issue is not addressed, the promise of distance learning for democratizing access to training opportunities will have the opposite effect of fostering elitism and restricted access.

Most course offerings by ODL institutions focus on Arts and business related studies while most African governments now prioritise science and technology oriented programmes like engineering and medicine. This results into skewed funding and capitation, often in favour of residential universities most of which offer “right programmes”. Accordingly, the rhetorical affirmation of the importance of ODL does not and may not necessarily translate to prioritised funding for ODL. Instead, ODL institutions get heavily disadvantaged in terms of capitation of government subsidy. There is also the misplaced belief that hard science programmes are too “practical” for them to be offered through the ODL mode of delivery. ODL centres must work around this by devising strategies that will enable them to adequately accommodate the practically oriented science programmes.

Conclusions

From the foregoing discussion it is clear that education more so higher education is at the heart of development globally as well as in Africa. Upgrading the skills of Africa’s largely unskilled workforce is essential if the continent is to advance and develop and distance education offers the most viable and feasible means through which this training and retraining may occur. The expansion of traditional models of skills delivery in the form of conventional university education is unlikely to be able to meet present and future demand. Consequently, the use of distance learning compatible with the continent’s existing technical capabilities and infrastructure should be considered as an important stratagem.

Distance education strategies need to take into account the region’s poorly developed telecommunications and technology infrastructure. More importantly, technologies and delivery models that cannot achieve significant economies of scale are not generally suitable for a continent that needs to provide flexible and cost-effective training for

hundreds of thousands of students and workers. An evolutionary ODL strategy that integrates successively advanced technologies incrementally, as they become available, is most appropriate for the continent. Still, the lack of infrastructure in Africa does not preclude the continent from moving forward on the application of distance education for technical and vocational training. The most viable option for the continent, under the prevailing conditions, is the implementation of a relatively basic model of distance education delivery that integrates print-based materials, remote study / access centers, and the incorporation of face-to-face components for imparting manual / psycho-motor skills. In addition ODL centres in Africa should liaise closely with their governments in order to match accurately ODL programmes and the national development goals thus further enhancing the role of ODL in development in Africa.

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