



TOWARDS VIABLE QUALITY HIGHER PROVISION IN AFRICA: YES WE CAN!

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Summary

World-wide, higher education is regarded as a catalyst for socio-economic growth and development. However the current higher education global dynamics are presenting higher education institutions with serious challenges, particularly in relation to access, affordability and quality. It is in this environment that Open and Distance Learning is assuming a growing importance. Given the acute shortage of contact Higher Education Institutions, ongoing internecine conflict, daunting socio-economic conditions and infrastructural constraints that prevail in many African countries, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is increasingly being perceived as perhaps the only viable higher education option, but the unprecedented and growing demand for higher education is placing growing pressure on the existing limited infrastructure, capacity and resources. This has forced many Africans to consider seriously and in an innovative manner, aspects such as collaboration, and the sharing of viable resources and capacity in order to meet their higher education needs. This paper investigates ODL in the African context and discusses some of those options.

World-wide, higher education is regarded as a catalyst for socio-economic growth and development, chiefly through the generation of appropriate human resources. This is particularly relevant for countries in the developing world. In acknowledging the generative role of education there is a concomitant acknowledgement of the seemingly intractable challenges faced by education stakeholders in fulfilling their mandates.

Just over a decade ago, the Preamble of the *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action*, adopted by the World Conference on Higher Education in 1998, stated the following:

Higher education has given ample proof of its viability over the centuries and of its ability to change and to induce change and progress in society. Owing to the scope and pace of change, society has become increasingly knowledge-based so that higher learning and research now act as essential components of the cultural, socio-

economic and environmentally-sustainable development of individuals, communities and nations.¹

Having made this assertion the preamble goes on to sketch the environment in which higher education institutions are obliged to function:

Everywhere higher education is faced with great challenges and difficulties related to financing, equity of conditions at access into and during the course of studies, improved staff development, skills-based training, enhancement and preservation of quality in teaching, research and services, relevance of programmes, employability of graduates, establishment of efficient co-operation agreements and equitable access to the benefits of international co-operation.²

Eleven years later these challenges are more pertinent than ever. The demand for access to higher education continues unabated. Globally, in 2004, 132 million students were enrolled in tertiary education, up from 68 million in 1991.³ It is estimated that over the last two decades global growth in tertiary enrolments has averaged at 5.1%, per annum while in Africa, this percentage is 8.7%.⁴ To give some indication of the skewed distribution of tertiary enrolments, out of every 100 adults of tertiary age, 69 are enrolled in tertiary education programmes in North America and Western Europe but only 5 are enrolled in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁵ At the same time public funding for tertiary education has declined in real terms, especially in low-income African countries, despite the acknowledged GDP growth on the Continent in recent years. In Sub-Saharan Africa for example, GDP growth for the period 2002-2007 accelerated to an average 6.0 %, ⁶ and yet tertiary public financing which averaged US\$6 800 per student annually in 1980, dropped to US\$981 in 2005 for 33 low-income countries.⁷

Given the world-wide recession, the general decline in state funding, and ever growing demands for access, affordability and flexibility from a student corps whose profile, identity

¹ World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century. Preamble. World Conference on Higher Education, held in Paris from 5 – 9 October 1998. "*Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action.*" http://www.unesco.org/education/eduprog/wche/declaration_eng.htm pg 2

² Ibid .pg 2

³ Global Education Digest 2006 Comparing Education Statistics around the World. Pg 21. Unesco Institute for Statistics, 2006, Montreal.

⁴ The World Bank. Accelerating Catch-up: Tertiary Education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa. Synopsis. Development Economics Research Group Africa Region Human Development Department, World Bank. October 2008 .

⁵ Global Education Digest 2006 Comparing Education Statistics Around the World. Pg 21. Unesco Institute for Statistics, 2006, Montreal. Pg 20

⁶ Ibid. pg 5

⁷ Accelerating Catch-Up: Tertiary Education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa. Synopsis. Development Economics research group. Africa Region Human Development Department. World Bank October 2008. Pg 11

and needs are changing fundamentally, universities the world over find themselves in a constant state of flux that one could argue, is impacting on their core identities. This is an era in which socio-economic and political strategies adopted by governments are impacting increasingly on the provision of higher education. Some of these include:

- tighter state steering in which the state uses a variety of steering mechanisms to direct and “enforce” the implementation of state policy;
- the notion of the Developmental State in which public higher education is subordinate to and in service of the state;
- market forces which influence and direct the kinds of qualifications and graduates that higher education institutions need to produce to meet socio-economic demands, and which impact on the research profiles and curricula of higher education institutions;
- declining staff numbers as a result of poor salaries, a lack of attention to professional development and a disregard of the importance of teaching as a profession; and
- a reduction in public funding that has seen third-stream income become a growing reality. (In South Africa for example, it is estimated that the average South African university now gets more than a quarter of its income from third stream sources.⁸)

Increasingly higher education is faced with a growing tension between access and affordability, and it is perhaps inevitable that one of the main casualties of this tension is educational quality and relevance. This is reflected in low throughput rates, burgeoning numbers of private providers (who in turn complain of barriers in accessing sufficient funding for research, and regulatory frameworks that make accreditation and quality control of programmes difficult), the proliferation of courseware that has not been subjected to any form of quality control, the poor quality of graduates, many of whom are totally unprepared for the world of work, poor student: funding and student: staff ratios with resultant heavy teaching workloads, and declining research activity and outputs, amongst others.

These dynamics are challenging deeply ingrained notions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy and of the university as a public good and it is asserted that curtailed institutional autonomy is impacting on institutions’ abilities to make the kinds of decisions that will allow them to adapt to the changing environment. A proliferation of technologies that are evolving at an unprecedented rate is facilitating the generation of vast bodies of knowledge that require updating or that become quickly redundant. This implies that both workers and educators need to be retrained to keep up with the changes, reinforcing the notion of lifelong learning and adding to the traditional concept of “student.” The ease of access to technology, and the demands being made on the time available for study by a very

⁸ Third Stream Income at South African Universities. Centre for Higher Education research, Teaching and Learning. Rhodes University. South Africa. February 2009. Pg 11

different kind of student, has increased demands for flexibility in education provision and reduced the need for contact, or face-to-face education. Nowadays most contact institutions also offer some or other form of “distance” education and in this sense, blended learning is a growing phenomenon.

Paradoxically, it would seem that instead of generating the kind of human capacity that is fundamental to the growth and development of societies, the rise of technology and the massification of education has spawned a set of dynamics that militate against the very progress that it was hoped would be achieved. It is in this context that Open and Distance Learning is assuming a growing importance. ODL’s accessibility, flexibility and various modes (or generations) of delivery, that can be adapted to virtually all requirements make it a viable and affordable alternative (or supplement) to contact education and a means of ameliorating to a certain extent, increased demands for access to education and the plethora of constraints that are impeding the rollout of higher education, especially in Africa.

The programme of the 2nd African Council on Distance Education Conference and General Assembly held in Lagos, Nigeria, at the National Open University of Nigeria, from 8 – 11 July 2008, not only re-emphasized Africa’s reliance on, and commitment to ODL, but it also reflected a sense of realism and practicality, as well as a congruence in African thinking on the educational priorities for the Continent. It highlighted six sub themes, namely:

- Open and Distance Learning and Teacher Development
- Meeting the Challenge of the Millennium Development Goals: Role, Potential and Impact of ODL
- Capacity Building in Open and Distance Learning
- Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning
- Collaboration and Partnerships in Open and Distance Learning: Models, Challenges and responses
- E-learning and Open Distance Learning in Developing Nations: problems and prospects⁹

In this view ODL needs to be seen in the context of bringing some order to an array of diverse and uncoordinated, even competing education initiatives on a Continent that is riven by every conceivable difference. William Easterly, former economist at the World Bank speaks of the \$2.3 trillion dollars spent on aid to Africa in the past 50 years and of the fact that despite this, many still live on less than \$1 a day, and without clean water, food,

⁹ 2nd ACDE Conference and General Assembly held in Lagos, Nigeria, at the National Open University of Nigeria, from 8 – 11 July 2008

sanitation, shelter, education or medicine.¹⁰ While highlighting a willingness to assist Africa, this statistic underscores the futility of allocating precious resources to projects and initiatives in piecemeal fashion under the assumption that they will make a lasting difference.

As Africa asserts its right to determine what is in its own best interest, so it must also commit to an in-depth process of analysis and strategy in order to arrive at a collective vision that will guide the development of higher education institutions in Africa, by means of models that will address their peculiar needs. ODL will feature very prominently in that process. This will obviously require a far greater degree of collaboration and planning than has hitherto been the case. The World Bank's Report: *Accelerating Catch-Up: Tertiary Education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa (2008)* alludes to the effort that is required as follows:

To address these issues, the focus should increasingly be on using existing resources more efficiently and on innovative sources of funding. Increasing efficiency levels in resource use will require political will, policy consensus and management acumen....To liberate the potential of the region's institutions to contribute more significantly to economic and social development in their countries and in the region as a whole, tertiary institutions will need to consciously and persistently transform themselves into a different type of educational enterprise: networked, differentiated, and responsive institutions on the production of strategically needed human skills and applied problem solving research. If achieved this would constitute a 21st Century version of the African 'Development University.'¹¹

Successful ODL implementation at local and continental levels will require a more mature and visionary view of collaboration than has previously been the case. Such collaboration has, I believe, already begun at regional level. As the largest ODL provider on the Continent, and as a key member of the ACDE, the University of South Africa has made some progress in this regard. In February 2008 Unisa hosted an ACDE stakeholder's workshop entitled: *DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR A NEW AFRICA IN A NEW PARADIGM: Towards a Pan African Consortium of Distance Education Institutions and a Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency for Distance Education in Africa*. In his opening address Prof Barney Pityana, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of Unisa stated the following:

ODL provides for a degree of innovation and flexibility and for collaboration and cooperation across countries. It is best able to maximise the mutual recognition of qualifications and transfer of credits of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training,

¹⁰ William Easterly. 2006. *The White Man's Burden: Why the west's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good*. Oxford University Press. Pg4

¹¹ *Accelerating Catch-Up: Tertiary Education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Synopsis. Development Economics research group. Africa Region Human Development Department. World Bank October 2008.pg 14.

of NEPAD, and of the more recent Algiers Declaration of the Ministers of Education of the Member States of the African Union (April 2005), as well as the Strategic Framework on Education and Human Resources, 2015 of the African Union.....We are gathered here because we believe that now is the time when distance education in Africa must place itself at a higher level if we are to help realise the aspirations of a Continent determined to advance higher education to unprecedented levels. First, the Consortium will help pull together all the Open Universities in Africa already committed to distance education. This will mean that collaboration will ensure mobility of students and staff, portability of courses, sharing of learning materials. It will also mean, in time, that common qualifications can be considered, and eventually it means becoming a Pan African University with a common charter, governance structure but with many campuses across the Continent, each with a specialisation or special focus. The benefit will be that the institution can draw from the academic expertise from across the Continent working collaboratively for the benefit of the African student. It will mean that the resources will be shared and we shall thus avoid the trap of trying to do distance education on the cheap....It is an adventurous proposal but one which Africa is moving towards if the *Constitutive Act of the African Union 2000*, as well the current moves and debates about an United States of Africa should ever bear fruit. Distance education can lead the way.¹²

ODL has an integral role to play in enhancing education provision in Africa and in so doing, contributing to the production of human resource capacity that will facilitate sustainable development on the Continent. If it is to succeed, then there will have to be a common commitment to a policy, strategy, plans and implementation process that will ensure the best possible utilization of available resources and capacity Continent-wide. At a time when higher education globally is facing testing times, Africa, now more than ever before, needs to take charge, and lead the way in the provision of higher education to her people.

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¹² Ibid.

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