

Editorial

WAJOFEL Special Issue on the 6th ACDE Conference and General Assembly

Dear precious and highly esteemed reader, we bring you a Special Issue of the West African Journal of Open, Flexible and E-Learning (WAJOFEL), although several months behind schedule, but comes with special distinguishing features which make it a must-have and must-read collector's item. The special feature is that it brings to you in a single pack, articles from highly revered, important persons, chief executives of ODL institutions and other practitioners across the continent of Africa who participated in the 6th ACDE Conference and General Assembly in September 2021. There are eleven papers altogether consisting of the presidential address of the ACDE President, one special guest address, three keynote addresses, an opinion piece, and five academic peer-reviewed papers from Nigeria, Ghana and Tanzania.

The second special feature is that this was the first time that ACDE was holding a virtual conference; something unknown in history up until the year 2020 when COVID-19 wrecked a lot of havoc in every continent of the world, in every sphere of human endeavour, and almost every household. The effects of COVID-19 were so devastating that staying and doing things together even for members of the same household was highly discouraged to protect life. Hence the compelling need for a virtual conference which held over 3 days with an astounding attendance of over 500 people. The third special significance of this edition is that it brought the ingenuity of people out through the tremendously high quality of papers in this edition. The content appeals to everybody in ODL and even those outside of it, although I hasten to add that everybody is now clamouring to belong to ODL because people have begun to see its importance in personal, national and global development.

This special issue collection takes off with the address of the ACDE President, Professor Goski Alabi, Vice-Chancellor of Laweh Open University College, Ghana, a passionate ODL advocate, who traced the historical evolution of the ACDE. Alabi examined the technical

activities, partnerships, collaborations and activities of the ACDE since its establishment in 2004. She reaffirms the ACDE vision of being the lead ODL agency in Africa and its mission of promoting collaboration, research and quality assurance of ODL to enhance access to inclusive quality education and training in Africa with SDG 4. The president honoured the memory of two stalwarts of the ACDE, who incidentally were distinguished international colleagues of mine in the early days of the formation of the ACDE – Professor Tolly Mbwette and Professor Primrose Kurasha. The presidential address concludes with a call to action for concerted efforts and commitment to leverage the current remote teaching and learning to situate ODL in the mainstream of educational delivery and development agenda on the African continent.

As opined by Chief Dr Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in his special guest address, there is some good in COVID-19, in that ‘what was abhorrent about COVID-19, in terms of handicapping our movement, has become a catapult for projecting the role of open and distance learning in the delivery of quality education’. Dr Obasanjo, who studied for and completed his Postgraduate Diploma, Master and Doctoral degrees through ODL, had one or two things to say in his special address. He debunked the idea of ODL being a poor cousin of the face-to-face mode of studying. He categorically stated that ‘the age-long debate about the quality of distance education and which is likely rested on ignorance is increasingly shifting in favour of those who have said that there is little or no difference with face-to-face delivery. If anything for the amount of ground to be covered, I think the walls of world universities have become constrained and the earlier we remove the walls, the more we will be able to achieve and for me if only for that, well COVID-19 is not the evil or the unmitigated evil that we have seen it to be’. When the COVID-19 lockdown was at its peak, educational systems all over the world were literally forced to engage in open and distance learning. Teachers and School Administrators despite the limitations of technology especially in Africa tested the ODL pudding and found its taste to be sweet. He concluded his address, which must be food for thought for practitioners of ODL and other modes of instruction challenging us by asking what ACDE Council and the members are doing about the increasing violence, radicality, ethnic and religious

tensions, political intolerance and conflict emanating from the mismanagement of diversity in the Africa continent? Chief Obasanjo's take is that ACDE must show relevance in solving this and other challenges facing the continent through the courses we deliver and how you deliver them.

The next set of papers are three Keynote addresses by two Vice-Chancellors and the Secretary General of the Zimbabwe Academy of Sciences, and an opinion piece by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Africa. Professor Elifas Bisanda (Vice-Chancellor, Open University of Tanzania) focused on *access to higher education in Africa and what ACDE should do as a response to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4*, the only goal dedicated to Education out of the 17 SDG Goals. Access to quality higher education in Africa remains the main challenge for educators, policymakers, and political leaders. The required workforce needed for the industrialisation of African countries South of the Sahara cannot be realised without parallel investments in education, particularly technical and science-based institutions of higher learning. It is Bisanda's belief that the intervention of ACDE is making available many lifelong learning opportunities through its member institutions. He has made a debatable conclusion that 'the continent is set to meet the deadline for attaining the SDG 4, where higher education will be available to all, including those from marginalised and disadvantaged communities. I am not too sure if you will agree with that. UNESCO in its review of SDGs in 2016 does not give any sub-region or country in Africa a chance for meeting the SDG goals. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring report and Bisanda's positive conclusion are going head-to-head and will provide the ground for lots of research and scholarship for educationists and especially ODL practitioners.

Professor Olufemi Peters (Vice-Chancellor, National Open University of Nigeria) writes on *Open and distance learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic: some lessons learned and emerging initiatives*. He began by reminding everyone that although the technologies used for open and distance learning keep changing over time and contexts, the principles of ODL dealing with three basic tenets of ODL (access, equity, and quality) remain the same. His main issue was to remind participants of the effect of COVID-19 amidst the new initiatives on

education by the African continent especially the African Union's Agenda 2063, and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) driven by the desire for a qualitative system of education and training that will provide the continent with efficient human resources that are adapted to Africa's core values and aspirations. He is of the view that the ACDE must play a very crucial role as the lead educational organisation for the African Union on Open and Distance Education, in the actualisation of the Union's continental initiatives.

The third Keynote address is by Professor Gabriel Kabanda (Secretary-General, Zimbabwe Academy of Sciences). He focused his address on *The ODL African Continental Education Strategy: Anchoring AI/Machine Learning on the African Technological Innovation and Investment Table*. This is one address that has gone beyond being a keynote. The paper could take all of our pages in this special edition as it was focused on emerging issues in technology-based ODL and backed by copious research evidence. The purpose of the research was to develop an economic framework and technology solutions for the development of knowledge, innovation, and enterprise on the African continent, using Zimbabwe as a representative example. He examined the potential applications of cybersecurity and machine learning to the business of producing and disseminating information. The quantitative dimension of his paper, which is something not to be read in a hurry, investigated machine learning and cybersecurity prototype models using an experiment as a study design. His results included the creation of a Bayesian Network model for cybersecurity.

The Vice-Chancellor and Principal, of the University of South Africa, Professor Lenkabula Puleng's paper titled *The idea of a university in the post-COVID-19 world*. She argues that the advent of COVID-19 created an imperative to review all that we know about repurposing universities before 2020. Her view is that higher education, more than any other sector, has experienced an existential crisis which adversely affected its delivery modes. She further underlined some of the challenges confronting university leaders in the COVID-19 era "... we were expected to manage people who are unfamiliar with working remotely; deal with demotivated employees who are going through deep grief of losing loved ones and colleagues during the pandemic; students who are also anxious and not sure of how to move forward.

We had to do a ‘systems think’ about the operations and the academic project, including how we deliver our services to students and academics”. Puleng provides readers with an analysis of the institutional transformations that took place at UNISA during the pandemic and presents a pan-African view of the responsibility that lies before education leaders generally and ODL institutional leaders particularly. She emphasised the importance of promoting the institutional digital transformation journey towards qualitative, affordable and accessible education that empowers individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in society.

The remaining set of papers in this publication, having been selected through refereed recommendation is quite germane to the conference and worthy of further reading by ODL practitioners. They were selected as the best fruits for a salad bowl because they addressed diverse but unique areas of distance learning.

Isaac S. Butswat & Ibrahim O. Salawu dealt with the *Incidence of burnout among distance learning practitioners in Nigeria using a NOUN Study Centre as a case study*. The issue of inclusive education was tackled head-on by the paper on *Accessing Higher Education through Open and Distance Learning by People with Disabilities in Nigeria* (Chinwe Patience Ihuoma & Angela Ebere Abaa). *Quality Assurance Mechanisms*, an ever-current area in education, not the least in ODL, was discussed from the perspective of being tools to *Achieve the Continental Education Strategy For Africa* (Fred Awaah, Peter Okebukola & Juma Shabani). Emmanuel Kigadye wrote on a difficult ODL issue of *Supervising Distance Students basing the paper on the Practice and Experience at The Open University of Tanzania*. The issue of parity between face-to-face and ODL was discussed from the point of view of the *Perceived Quality of ODL Resources and Effective Learner Support Services among Dual Mode Institutions in Ghana* (Munkaila Abdulai, Fred Awaah, Michael Osei and Ernest Yayviah).

In all, the results of these research-based papers and their recommendations for ODL practice are that: organised training for staff on signs, prevention, and recovery from burnout to alleviate, reduce or enable recovery from burnout among staff (Butswat & Salawu); the

need for elimination of discrimination against people with disabilities and the provision of infrastructure and materials for improved access to education to have more people with disabilities accessing and succeeding in Open and Distance Education (Ihuoma & Abaa); the prevalence of academic corruption in the Africa Higher Education Space (AHES) so that CESA can succeed, partly rests on the use of an African-born educational model that assures quality and can reduce academic dishonesty towards the achievement of the CESA (Awaah, Okebukola & Shabani). The solution to the challenges posed by supervising doctoral candidates through a distance mode of delivery has been placed squarely on the knowledge gained from training and best practice elsewhere (Kigadye); and, as a solution to the Perceived Quality of Open and Distance Learning Resources and Effective Learner Support Services among Dual-mode Universities in Ghana, distance learning universities are advised to invest more in technology-driven services that would enhance quality systems and instructors' support while attending to the needs of the learners quickly (Abdulai, Awaah, Osei and Yayviah).

As diverse as these research studies are, they one way or another other point to raising the quality of ODL provisions on the African continent to enhance the success of CESA and the overall capacity and capability of ODL. The reader is invited to read through all these papers and digest them to help buoy the efficacy of instruction through the ODL mode.

Emeritus Professor Olugbemirot Jegede

Guest Editor

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