

Commentary:

**Reflections On Recent Developments in
Inclusive Open and Distance Learning**

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By its very nature, open and distance learning (ODL) ought to be inclusive, given that it is access oriented. In this short reflective piece, we mull over recent developments in the ODL terrain against the backdrop of the post-COVID-19 era and the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), which is driven by artificial intelligence (AI). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced populations worldwide to stay at home to avoid the spike in infections, which had the potential for devastating loss of human lives. In March 2020 UNESCO reported that an estimated 1.6 billion learners worldwide were negatively impacted by closures of institutions of learning due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic caused global disruptions on an unprecedented scale and forced work, teaching, learning, research, and daily communication to be undertaken online.

ODL can be described as an organised educational activity in which the constraints on study are minimised in terms of access, entry, or time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these. It is an educational design intended to reach learners in their homes, offices, shops, or anywhere, and to provide learning opportunities for them to obtain higher education qualifications without attending formal classes in person. ODL therefore creates opportunities for lifelong learning, no matter where or when the students want to study (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2014). It is mediated through the uses of information and communication technologies (ICTs). These technologies include access to the internet, learning management systems (LMS), video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet, as well as gadgets such as laptops, Tablets, and smart phones.

The notion of openness is multifaceted and highly contested. Gourley & Lane (2009) conceive of openness in distance learning as a system of higher education offerings where there are no barriers to entry, no entry requirements – only exit standards. Where a person’s background and previous advantage or disadvantage are entirely irrelevant. They argue that “open education potentially opens not only who produces the ‘content’ and the ‘context’ in which the ‘content’ is learned, but also who validates that learning so that it has the currency in the labour and/or interest markets”. For Letseka (2021:134), openness denotes “removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision,

student-centredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed”. In this regard, “ODL is accessible in terms of time, pace, space and people, without barriers”.

The concept of inclusion is another area of contestation. When inclusion is superficially practised, it concomitantly results in exclusion. Mutanga (2015) argues that the main conceptual weakness of current understanding around inclusion and exclusion is a failure to engage with social justice concerns. It is difficult to agree on what educational exclusion means. Moreover, the language of exclusion is so versatile and adaptable that there may be a temptation to dress up every deprivation as a case of social exclusion. Ainscow (2005) highlights the following key elements for inclusion in education. First, inclusion is a never-ending process of finding better ways to respond to diversity. Second, it aims at identifying and removing barriers. Third, it is concerned about teaching presence, participation, and achievement of learning objectives for all students. Finally, it is about ways in which groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement might be supported to succeed. Thus, inclusion requires a deeper conception of access, one that incorporates the full range of resources which inform required understanding of access and value in learning (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2009). Maile (2016) argues that for those who could not get the right skills in the first chances, ODL provides opportunities that can be regarded as second chances.

During COVID-19 the requirement for work, teaching, learning, research, and all forms of communication to be undertaken online was premised on the perceived ubiquity of the offerings of the 4IR. When learners and students were forced to stay at home it was generally assumed that they will be in family households that have access to electricity and reliable internet connectivity, and that they will have the basic tools of the trade such as laptops, Tablets, and/or smart phones. However, this assumption was flawed in that it glossed over critical fault lines of global socio-economic inequalities. Chancel, Piketty, Saez & Zucman (2022) write that global wealth inequalities are more pronounced than income inequalities. The richest 10% of the global

population currently takes 52% of global income, whereas the poorest half of the population earns only 8.5%. On average, an individual from the top 10% of the global income distribution earns \$122,100 per year, whereas an individual from the poorest half of the global income distribution only makes \$3,920 per year. Chancel et al (2022) argue that the poorest half of global population barely owns any wealth at all, possessing just 2% of that total. In contrast, the richest 10% of the global population own 76% of all wealth. On average, the poorest half of the population owns 'Purchasing Power Parity' (PPP) of \$4,100, while the top 10% own \$771,300 on average.

What do these indicators mean for ODL? They put the 4IR and digital transformation at the centre of the way work is done. But they also highlight the potential for massive digital exclusions. Ironically, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic can be said to have functioned as a catalyst for innovative ideas and the rollout of digital transformation initiatives in ODL. These ideas and initiatives marked the integration between the physical, digital, and biological spheres (Neto, Maia, Neiva, Scalia, Salgueirinho & Guerra, 2020). Machines and algorithms ushered in the era of fully autonomous robot surgeons operating in hospitals, as well as autonomous vehicle driven by AI. There has been a burgeoning of smart learning centres at universities worldwide in areas such as cyberlearning and intelligent technologies, as well as endowed Chairs in nanoscience and nanotechnology, AI in education, innovation and development, online learning, open educational resources (OERs), and open distance and e-learning. These smart learning centres and endowed Chairs are dedicated to advancing cutting edge research in AI in education in support of the attainment of sustainable development goals (SDGs); the role of big data and data analytics; open educational resources (OERs); innovation and development; online learning, and open distance and e-learning to mention a few.

In 2021 UNISA launched the Academic Development Open Virtual Hub (ADOVH), which is a fully automated self-recording studio which caters for self-recording and streaming of educational videos to UNISA's distance education students. During the UNISA International Open Distance e-Learning annual research conference in August 2023

the ADOCV celebrated the arrival of Ulwazi, the first artificial intelligence humanoid at UNISA, further cementing the university's embracing of AI in higher education.

With a student headcount of over 400 000, including international students from 130 countries worldwide, making it one of the world's *mega* universities in Africa. In 2021 UNISA readapted its comprehensive open distance eLearning (CODEL) strategy to enable it to administer online examinations for over 180 000 students. UNISA's CODEL strategy embraces digital transformation to leverage on 4IR technologies, thus allowing it to become a fit-for-purpose, future-fit and tech-fit institution. Focused and strategic use of AI within organisations with large student numbers such as UNISA assists with data manipulation and brings efficiency to mundane repetitive tasks, resulting in quick and accurate decision-making. Thus, in future, AI is going to be pivotal to the way ODL is conceived and practised.

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