



The Role of UNESCO Chair on Open Distance Learning (ODL) in Advancing Innovation and Flexibility in Distance e-Learning

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Abstract

Open distance learning and teaching do not require students and lecturers to be in the same space and time for learning, teaching, research, and community engagement to occur. Instead, the latter are leveraged through the use of modern digital technologies such as internet connectivity, reliable WiFi, and student support in the form of provision of ODL tools of the trade, such as laptops, desktops, tablets, and smartphones. Success in ODL learning, teaching, research, and community engagement requires digitally skilled, capable, and empowered staff and students. This paper explores the role and contribution of UNESCO on Open Distance Learning (ODL) at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in advancing innovation and flexibility in distance e-learning. It does this through offering the reader an historical background of UNISA, which hosts the UNESCO Chair on ODL. Second, it sketches the founding objectives and research initiatives of the UNESCO Chair on ODL. Third, it provides a review of the UNESCO Chair on ODL's research and innovation (R&) initiatives and impact in distance e-learning, in the form of research seminars, annual research conference, scholarly books and research papers published in international, peer reviewed and accredited scholarly journals.

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Introduction

The UNESCO Chair on Open Distance Learning (ODL) at the University of South Africa (UNISA) was established in April 2018, by a contractual agreement between UNESCO's Director General and UNISA's Vice Chancellor. The UNESCO Chair on ODL was established with the primary aim of developing capacity in ODL teaching, learning and research at UNISA. The UNISA is one of the oldest and largest dedicated open distance and e-learning (ODEL) universities in Southern Africa (Letseka, Mphahlele & Akintolu, 2025; Craven, 2019; Manson, 2018). It aspires to be Africa's leading ODEL teaching, research, and community engagement university, which is also globally competitive as per the UNISA (2018) *Open Distance e-Learning Policy*. With 152 years of existence, the UNISA is one of the oldest *mega-universities* in the world. *Mega-universities* are characterised by enrolments of more than 100,000 students (Daniel and Mackintosh, 2003; Kilic, Seggie, Kiziltipe & Gacal, 2023). Kilic et al. (2023: 300) identify the following characteristics of *mega universities*:

- Strong relations with the state and involvement in the processes of national policymaking.
- Easy access to communication and network facilities.
- Integration with other higher education providers that do not offer distance education services.
- A large number of students.
- A vocational focus in the curriculum with an emphasis on areas of high demand.
- Cost effectiveness in comparison with conventional higher education institutions.
- Interdependent systems of operating focused on the division of labour in designing and producing materials and transmitting them to students.
- Difficulty in gaining quality and recognition due to the connotations of quality with age.

- Exclusive access and human interaction that may be overcome by new technology in the future, and
- Significant international roles.

In this reflective paper, we sketch the role and contributions of the UNESCO Chair on ODL to the advancement of innovation and flexibility in distance e-learning. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section offers a brief historical background on the UNISA, which is home to the UNESCO Chair on ODL. The second section maps out the founding objectives and research initiatives of the UNESCO Chair on ODL (Letseka, 2021). The third section offers a review of the UNESCO Chair on ODL's research and innovation (R&I) initiatives and their impact on distance e-learning. The fourth and final section offers some concluding remarks.

UNISA: Historical Background

The UNISA is one of the largest dedicated open distance learning (ODL) institutions in Southern Africa, with aspirations to become the leading provider of world-class distance higher education and a leader in ODL research. The UNISA was founded in 1873 as an examining body for affiliated university colleges. 152 years old at the time of writing, the UNISA is one of the oldest dedicated open distance e-learning (ODeL) universities in Southern Africa (Letseka, Mphahlele & Akintolu, 2025; Craven, 2019; Manson, 2018). With an estimated student headcount of 400,000, an estimated 7000 staff members, multiple regional centres, and a satellite campus in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the UNISA aspires to become one of the leading providers of world-class higher education and a leader in ODeL research in Africa. Given its size and reach nationally, continentally, and worldwide, the UNISA has been described as a *mega university*, and the only dedicated distance education provider in Southern Africa (Daniel, 2013; Letseka, 2015; Prinsloo, 2015; Tlale & Mahlo, 2016). Daniel (2013:185) notes that since the mid-1990s, the UNISA has been regarded as:

A *vita academia* which centres round the adult learner and creates an environment of lifelong learning through systems of adult basic education, student

support and interactive means of teaching technologies. This vision of *vita academia* acknowledges the existence of all other institutions of higher learning and foresees a very broad cooperation with them to bring about living systems of dual-mode teaching (Daniel, 2013:185).

The general mission of ODeL institutions is to promote the following principles of *social justice*:

- *Equity and access*, understood as advancing social justice for black Africans, women, people with disabilities, as well as the rural and urban poor.
- *Openness*, understood to mean the removal of barriers to learning, particularly for marginalised sections of society.
- *Student support*, which entails meeting the requisite needs of all learners through the provision of reliable internet connectivity, digital tools of the trade (laptops, internet connectivity, uninterrupted WiFi).
- *Flexibility*, which ensures that students can study wherever they are, and at their own pace.
- *Affordability*, ODeL programs are cheaper than programs that are offered at full-time, campus-based universities. Affordability ensures inclusion of the poor masses of previously disadvantaged and marginalised members of society.

The Founding Principles of the UNESCO Chair on ODL

The UNESCO Chair on ODL at UNISA was established in April 2018 through a contractual agreement entered into by UNESCO's Director General and UNISA's Vice-Chancellor and Principal, and under the auspices of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Network. The establishment followed approval of the proposal to establish the endowed UNESCO Chair, which was submitted by the Chair holder in April 2016. The UNITWIN/UNESCO Network is a partnership between UNESCO and the network of higher education or research institutions in different countries, two of which must be in the Global South. The partners pool their competencies and resources around a particular topical theme or

themes. The partnership is formalised through a signed agreement between the Director-General of UNESCO and the Vice-Chancellor (s) of the partner institutions in the UNITWIN/UNESCO Network (UNESCO, 2022a). The aims of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Network are:

- to support the establishment of the UNESCO Chairs and the UNITWIN Cooperation Programme in higher education and research institutions;
- to promote international inter-university cooperation and networking to enhance institutional capacities through knowledge sharing and collaborative work;
- to pool the resources of higher education and research institutions worldwide to address pressing challenges and contribute to the development of societies;
- to enhance the capacities of higher education and research institutions through an integrated system of research, training, information, and documentation activities related to diverse fields;
- to facilitate collaboration between high-level, internationally recognised researchers and teaching staff at universities and other higher education and research institutions, in the spirit of international solidarity; and
- to promote the North-South, South-South and North-South-South cooperation as a strategy to develop institutions (UNESCO, 2022a).

The UNESCO Chair on ODL at UNISA is based on four key objectives. First, to produce ODL research that is responsive to UNISA's vision of 'the African University shaping futures in the service of humanity'. Given that "ODL is a multidimensional concept that aims to bridge the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between students and the institution, students and academics, students and courseware and students and their peers' (UNISA, 2018, p.2), the UNESCO Chair harnesses research expertise under the auspices of the UNITWIN/UNESCO programs to frame a high level ODL research agenda that shapes distance e-learning practice and informs policy in South Africa and Southern Africa, while also being responsive to the

UNESCO Priority Africa's Flagship Program 1, Campus Africa: Reinforcing Higher Education in Africa (UNESCO, 2022b). The overall objective of Campus Africa is to build integrated, inclusive, and quality tertiary education systems and institutions for the development of inclusive and equitable societies on the continent. This is done by (a) enhancing the research capacity of African tertiary institutions and by increasing research outcomes through effective networking. (b) improving the availability and quality of data on tertiary education in Africa to inform evidence-based decision-making. (c) improving access to higher education and TVET for all in Africa, and promoting equal opportunities for learners of all backgrounds, including vulnerable and marginalised groups, in pursuing learning opportunities and individual development, and (d) promoting recognition of qualifications backed up by mutually recognised quality assurance mechanisms (UNESCO, 2022b:17).

Second, to build capacity geared at improving the quality and coverage of higher education through the distance learning mode. One of the major challenges facing the UNISA, South Africa, and the Southern African region is the demand for knowledgeable, highly skilled, and qualified ODL teachers, researchers, scholars, and managers. The UNESCO Chair at UNISA addresses this demand through inclusive and sustainable opportunities for the development of the requisite ODL skills. This is done, first through the rollout of capacity building training, UNESCO Chair on ODL's Research Seminar Series, which comprises ten (10) seminars annually held from February to November. The seminar series invites ODL experts from UNISA, South Africa, the African continent, and from the international community to share the results of their research in technology-enabled learning and teaching; digital inclusion/exclusion; open educational resources (OERs); massive open online courses (MOOCs); learning analytics; e-portfolios, among others. More shall be said in the penultimate section below, which is on the review of the UNESCO Chair on ODL's innovation and flexibility initiatives and their impact on distance e-learning.

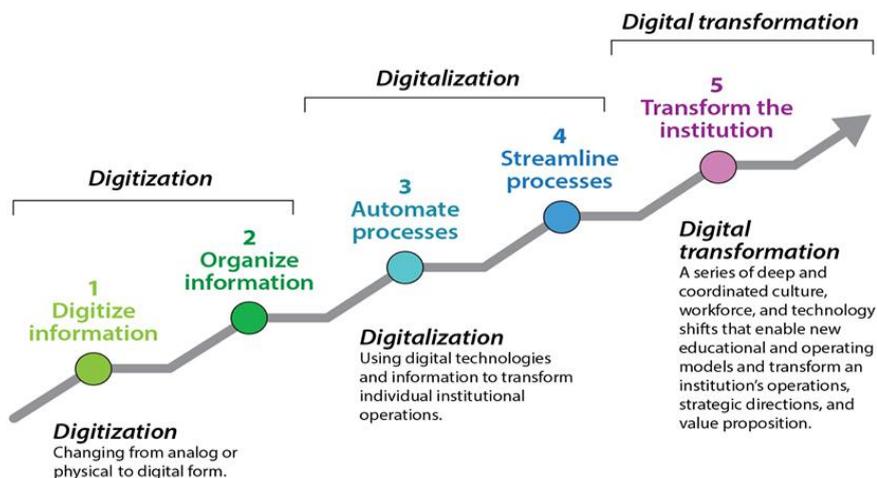


Figure 1: Digital Transformation in Higher Education

Of critical importance to capacity in ODL is digitality or what has become known as the advent of Digital Transformation (DX). Brooks and McCormack (2020:3) define DX as “a series of deep and coordinated culture, workforce, and technology shifts that enable new educational and operating models and transform an institution’s business model, strategic directions, and value proposition”. Figure 1 shows that digital competence begins at the level of *digitisation*, which entails transition from analogue to digital; to *digitalisation*, which presumes possession of the requisite competencies for transformative use of digital technologies, to *digital transformation*, which is the stage of coordinated and transformative culture and digital uptake. Brooks and McCormack (2020) argue that DX runs wide and deep across the whole institution, requiring innovative leadership at all levels, as well as advanced cross-unit coordination. It demands flexibility and agility that stretch higher education beyond the comforts of its traditions. Thus, possession of the requisite digital capacities and expertise is a *sine qua non* to creating a more accessible and equitable environment for ODeL scholars and students in Southern Africa.

Third, to position the UNESCO Chair as the Southern African regional hub for an integrated system of research, training, information sharing, and documentation in ODL. Since the establishment of the UNESCO Chair on ODL in 2018, there has been a burgeoning culture of

organised engagements in ODL research at UNISA. Beyond the Research Seminar Series, the UNESCO Chair on ODL has played host to the UNISA International ODeL conference. The conference not only explored a wide variety of topical ODeL themes such as (a) Mediating Open Distance and e-Learning in the Advent of Global Crises; (b) All things research in ODeL, and (c) ODeL in the Global South: Opportunities in times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), among others. It also attracted rich and diverse ODeL think tanks and game-changers as keynote speakers, panellists, and conference delegates. During its first term (2018-2022) the UNESCO Chair on ODL's inputs (research seminars and the annual research conference) yielded a rich repertoire of impactful research outputs in the form of peer reviewed scholarly books, peer reviewed scholarly book chapter, and research papers published in international peer reviewed scholarly journals that are indexed by the Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), and the Directorate of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), among others. It can be reasonably argued that the UNESCO Chair succeeded in creating a vibrant, supportive, and enabling environment in which curiosity and devotion to ODL teaching, learning, research, and community engagement can be cultivated, nourished, and sustained.

Fourth, to align the UNESCO Chair with international ODL practitioner institutions with a view to facilitating exchange and collaboration in the delivery of quality distance education and service to humanity. The importance of aligning the UNESCO Chair's research and innovation initiatives with national, regional, and global ODL partners cannot be overemphasised in our highly networked era (Castells, 2010; Castells & Cardoso, 2005). Thus, the UNESCO Chair forges mutually beneficial collaborative research partnerships with national, regional, and international ODL practitioner institutions for the purposes of information sharing and sharing of examples of good practice in ODL. To that end, the UNESCO Chair has established collaborative relations with national, regional, and international distance e-learning organisations such as, among others, the National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa (NADEOSA); the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA); the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE); the

Commonwealth of Learning (CoL); and the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE). The UNESCO Chair further enjoys a rich pan-Africa collaborative research relations with the SADC Centre for Distance Education, Botswana Open University; the Centre for Teaching and Learning, National University of Lesotho; the Institute of Distance Education, Eswatini University; the Unit for Distance Education, University of Pretoria; the Open University of Mauritius; Open University of Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; the Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL), and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN); and the Distance Learning Institute of the University of Lagos (Letseka, 2021).

UNESCO Chair on ODL's Research and Innovation (R&I) Initiatives

In this section, we broach the UNESCO Chair on ODL's research and innovation (R&) initiatives. These include but are not limited to the UNESCO Chair's Research Seminar Series; UNESCO Chair's Research Retreats, and the UNESCO Chair's annual research conference, which subsequently evolved into the UNISA International Annual ODeL conference. As alluded to in the section above, the UNESCO Chair Research Seminar Series hosted ODeL experts who shared their research findings in, among others, the following areas: technology-enabled learning and teaching; digital inclusion/exclusion; open educational resources (OERs); massive open online courses (MOOCs); learning analytics; e-portfolios. In this section, we expound the contribution of the UNESCO Chair's Research Seminar Series and annual research conference.

Date	Name (s)	Affiliation	Title
26/02/2020	Prof. M. Letseka	UNISA	Trends in Open Distance Learning
04/03/2020	Dr. R. Aluko	University of Pretoria	Open Distance Learning and the Fourth Industrial Revolution in

			the Emerging Economies: Challenges and Prospects
10/06/2020	Prof. M. Letseka	UNISA	Open Distance Learning in COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities
08/07/2020	Prof. G. Van den Berg	UNISA	How COVID-19 has changed open Distance Learning: A Curriculum Perspective
12/08/2020	Prof. P. Prinsloo	UNISA	Rethinking Student Vulnerability and Risk: Research Student Retention and Success in Open Education Contexts
16/09/2020	Mr .N. Mosia	UNISA	Game-based Learning in Engineering Tuition: A Smart Technology, Adaptive and Instructional Scaffolding Teaching and Learning Technique
14/10/2020	Prof. R. Kizito	University of the Witwatersrand	Moving from Challenges to Opportunities: What will become our 'New Normal for Teaching and Learning in an ODL Context?
11/11/2020	Prof. J. Olivier	North West University	Self-Directed Multimodal Learning in the Open Distance Learning Space

Table 1 captures the UNESCO Chair Research Seminar presentations that were made in 2020. Four were made by UNISA professors of

ODL, two from the College of Education (CEDU), one from the College of Management and Economic Sciences (CEMS), and one was by a junior lecturer from the College of Science, Engineering, and Technology (CSET). There were three presentations made by external, non-UNISA guest presenters from neighbouring universities - The University of Pretoria, the University of the Witwatersrand, and North West University. The titles of the presentations are tilted more towards trends, challenges, and opportunities in ODL. This is not surprising given that the year 2020 was at the height of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The non-UNISA guest presenters shared the results of their research and generated debate in (a) the nexus between ODL and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), (b) the changing teaching and learning landscape in the ODL context, and self-directed multimodal learning.

Date	Name (s)	Affiliation	Title
10/02/2021	Prof. M. Letseka	UNISA	How ODL can potentially turn COVID-19 challenges into opportunities
29/03/2021	Prof. M. Sefotho	University of Johannesburg	Open distance e-learning and visual impairment: disrupted echolocation
14/04/2021	Prof. S. Naidu	Australia	Building resilience in ODL post-Covid-19
07/05/2021	Prof. H. Ebrahim	UNISA	<i>Sivulithuba</i> : Creating opportunities for capacity building and access to early years
15/06/2021	Prof. K. Ferreira-Meyers	University of Eswatini	Does open equate to flexible in the teaching and learning of languages?
26/07/2021	Prof. H. Hambrock	Concordia University, USA	Are we ready for seamless learning in an open education system

11/08/2021	Dr. M. Ooko	University of Pretoria	Challenges and Opportunities posed by COVID-19 lockdown: taking a deeper look into the learning support systems in a distance education program at the University of Pretoria
15/09/2021	Ms. M. Modise	UNISA	Face-to-face with COVID-19: Frank introspection about what we know, what we can and cannot do in ODeL environments
20/10/2021	Prof. J. Roberts	UNISA	Open Distance Learning (ODL) research in developing countries: an analysis of themes, trends and publication vehicles towards the development of a context-specific ODL research framework

Table 2 captures the UNESCO Chair Research Seminar presentations that were made in 2021. While again there were four UNISA professors and a lecturer who made presentations, there were two presentations from neighbouring universities, namely the University of Johannesburg and the University of Pretoria. But there were also two international guest presenters, one from Eswatini University and the other from Australia. Again, there were three presentations on the role of ODL in navigating the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. But there were other more fascinating fields, such as, for instance, the nexus between ODL and disability (visual impairment); ODL and early childhood education; ODL and seamless learning, as well as analysis

of themes, trends, and publication vehicles in the context-specific ODL research framework.

During its first term, the UNESCO Chair on ODL hosted a total of four (4) UNISA International Annual ODeL Conferences as follows:

- The UNESCO Chair on Open Distance Learning's Annual ODeL Conference, "Galvanising Open Distance Learning (ODL) Research". African Pride Irene Country Lodge, 28-30 August 2019.
- The virtual UNISA International Open Distance Learning's Annual ODeL Conference. "Mediating Open Distance and e-Learning in the Advent of Global Crises", 3-6 August 2021.
- The virtual UNISA International Open Distance Learning's Annual ODeL Conference. "All things research in ODeL", 2-5 August 2023.
- The UNISA International Open Distance Learning's Annual ODeL Conference. "ODeL in the Global South: Opportunities in times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity", Emperors Palace Hotel, 14-17 August 2023.

The commitment to create a supportive and enabling environment to engage in robust discussion on topical issues in ODL is pursued through the UNESCO Chair on ODL's international annual research conferences. Over the years, the conferences have been successful in inviting high-level keynote speakers as well as rich and diverse teams of panellists. For instance, the inaugural UNESCO Chair on ODL Conference held in August 2019 at the African Pride Irene Country Lodge in Pretoria hosted Professor Tony Bates as keynote speaker. Prof Bates had successfully launched his book, *Teaching in the Digital Age: Guidelines for Designing Teaching and Learning*, at the 27th International Council of Open and Distance Education (ICDE)'s World Conference in Toronto, Canada, in 2017.

The 2021 three-day UNISA International ODeL Conference, under the theme, 'Mediating Open Distance and e-Learning in the Advent of Global Crises' featured Dr. Sanjaya Mishra of the Commonwealth of Learning, in Canada; Prof. Aras Bozkurt of Anadolu University in Turkey, and Prof. Maha Bali of the American University in Cairo,

Egypt, as keynote speakers on each day of the conference. The conference further hosted an invaluable panel discussion that featured Prof. Paul Muyinda of Makerere University, Uganda; Dr. Catherine Cronin, of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Ireland; Prof. Romeela Mohee, Governor of higher education, Government of Mauritius; Dr. Rita Kizito of the University College Twente, the Netherlands, who held informative conversations around unbundling and re-bundling in/of higher education in times of crises: implications for open distance learning.

In the same vein, the 2022 three-day UNISA International ODeL Conference was held under the theme, 'All Things Research in Open Distance and eLearning'. The keynote speaker's lineup included Prof. Asha Singh Kanwar, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth of Learning in Canada; Prof. Martha Fields Cleveland-Innes, of Athabasca University, in Canada, and Prof. Dr. Olaf Zawacki-Richter of the University of Oldenburg in Germany. The panellists included, among others, Prof. Cosmas Maphosa of the University of eSwatini, eSwatini; Prof. Nyna Amin of the University of KwaZulu-Natal; Dr. Tony Mays of the Commonwealth of Learning, Canada; Dr. Ruth Aluko of the University of Pretoria; Dr. Catherine Mkude of the Open University of Tanzania; and Prof. Paul Henry Gundani, Vice-Chancellor of the Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe. Like the UNESCO Chair on ODL, the UNISA International ODeL Conference provides a supportive and enabling space for young and emerging scholars not only to meet, think tanks and game changers in ODeL, but also to interact and network with them in real life.

Conclusion

In this reflective paper, we have sketched the role and contribution of UNESCO Chair on ODL in advancing innovation and flexibility in distance e-learning. Located at the UNISA, which is the largest dedicated ODL institution in Southern Africa, with aspirations to become the leading provider of world class distance higher education and a leader in ODL research, the UNESCO Chair on ODL occupies a privileged position to offer leadership in ODL innovation and

flexibility. The paper shared the Chair's objectives and their operationalisation in the form of a sustainable and impactful UNESCO Chair Research Seminar Series and the UNISA International ODeL Conference, through which national, regional, and international ODL think tanks and game changers generously shared their research findings and experiences in advancing ODL innovation and flexibility.

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