



Reflective Piece

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Few could have imagined that the University of the Cape of Good Hope (UCGH) - founded in 1873 by an Act of the Cape Colony's Parliament and today known as the University of South Africa (UNISA) - would become the pioneering ancestor of Open, Distance, and eLearning (ODeL) on the African continent and globally. From its earliest days, UNISA embraced a mission that would eventually transcend national borders, making higher education accessible to all who aspired to empower themselves and attain a deeper, executive-level understanding of the world. For decades, this vision was sustained through the simple yet powerful industrial civilisation of the time, the medium of the post office, which carried assignments, study packs, newsletters, results, and certificates between the university and students scattered across the globe.

The challenges and triumphs that shaped UNISA'S journey helped refine Comprehensive Open Distance eLearning (hereafter CODEL) into a more effective and inclusive model for all our students, especially those from the African continent. From its early role as a custodian of examinations for institutions across the subcontinent, UNISA evolved into a university determined to open its doors to all students, and with a strong commitment to those historically excluded by geography, socioeconomic barriers, or systemic injustices. During the difficult years of South Africa's political and apartheid history, UNISA stood as an inclusive institution, affirming that knowledge could transcend walls of exclusion.

As African academic leaders, we are constantly inspired by such a vision, and we recognise the urgent need to educate and nurture



generational leaders, innovators, and changemakers through models of learning that offer flexibility of time and access, extending education even to the most remote mountain plains and valleys of the continent. For the first time, African nations no longer had to send our brightest minds abroad to establish world-class ODeL institutions; instead, we could work together to draw from UNISA'S legacy to help each other to build universities that are firmly rooted in African realities yet globally connected.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) stands as a powerful testament to this vision. As Nigeria's distinguished ODeL institution, NOUN has drawn inspiration from UNISA's path while boldly charting its own trajectory of widening access, transforming communities, and demonstrating how open and distance learning can be a catalyst for national development. Its establishment as a pioneer in West Africa tells a story of determination, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to the principle that higher education must not remain the privilege of a few, but the right of every citizen with the desire to learn. NOUN represents not only access, but also innovation.

I am honoured that under the leadership of this esteemed Chemist, an intellectual and academic leader in Nigeria, the continent and the world, Professor Peters' and his management's determination to bridge the gap between the classroom and the learner, wherever they may be, has propelled the university to continually innovate by first through print media, later through technology, and more recently via dynamic digital platforms. Its extensive nationwide network of study centres has made it possible to realise the vision of a true university without boundaries, that is, an institution that dissolves walls between urban and rural, elite and ordinary, privileged and marginalised.

The ODeL system stands as a beacon of hope in an era of global disruption. The COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed the relevance of open and distance learning, highlighting the foresight of those who envisioned such institutions decades ago. More than ever, ODeL must never be allowed to fail, as its mission aligns with both continental and global priorities: expanding access to tertiary education, promoting digital inclusion, empowering women and youth, and building capacity



for sustainable national development. It is central to creating the Africa we aspire to - an Africa where no learner is left behind in education or digital spaces, where students do not have to risk their lives or be swept away by raging rivers in pursuit of knowledge, and where indigenous knowledge and modern learning platforms together nurture critical thinking, innovation, and ethical leadership. Through such education, African universities can provide generations to solve pressing challenges: ending conflicts, managing natural resources responsibly, eradicating poverty, combating corruption, and transforming the continent's vast potential into shared prosperity.

Through the transformative leadership of UNISA, NOUN, and other sister African ODeL universities, the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) was born out of a collective aspiration: to ensure that Africa takes its rightful place in shaping the future of open, distance, and e-learning. Since its inception in 2004, ACDE has grown into the revered continental platform where institutions, scholars, and practitioners converge to advance the cause of accessible, innovative, and transformative education. The leadership of the UNISA, NOUN, and other ODeL institutions have been central to this journey. Both institutions, though shaped by different histories, carry a shared mission — to democratise access to higher education and to contribute to Africa's intellectual and socio-economic development. Together, they represent sister institutions leading the charge for accessible, innovative, and inclusive education in Africa. Their journeys, though shaped by different histories, converge on the shared mission of reclaiming Africa's intellectual futures through open, distance, and e-learning.

Looking at the recent engagements between the UNISA and the NOUN, one can see the deepening of a truly continental partnership in ODeL leadership. While serving as Principal and Vice-Chancellor of UNISA and Treasurer of the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE), I had the privilege of working closely with Professor Olufemi Peters, Vice-Chancellor of NOUN and First Vice-President of ACDE. In August 2022, during the 44th ACDE Board Meeting hosted at UNISA's Pretoria and Johannesburg campuses, Professor Peters stepped in to chair the Executive Board sessions on behalf of the ACDE



President. His leadership helped shape landmark resolutions in ODeL transformation, including the strengthening of quality assurance toolkits and the harmonisation of research frameworks across African institutions.

This sisterly and brotherly relationship between our two institutions continues to yield tangible collaborations. Professor Peters invited UNISA'S renowned ODeL scholar, Professor Paul Prinsloo, to serve as a Visiting Professor at NOUN, contributing his expertise on learning analytics. His engagement, expected to take place semi-annually, will include seminars and scholarly exchanges with NOUN'S faculty and students.

In March 2024, I had the honour of delivering the lecture at the NOUN'S 12th Convocation Ceremony, held at the Convocation Arena on the University'S main campus in Abuja, Nigeria. My address on the theme, 'Volatility and Opportunities in Higher Education', was warmly received by the NOUN epistemic community. We were further treated to a tour of the NOUN'S impressive facilities — a visible testament to Africa'S capacity to sustain and grow its own educational institutions. This experience underscored a profound truth: Africa has within itself the resources, knowledge systems, and resilience needed to solve its own challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic offered a vivid reminder of this, as, despite delays in accessing vaccines and other interventions, many communities drew on indigenous knowledge systems that provided protection and mitigated the devastating impact of the virus. Such resilience reinforces the conviction that, by trusting in our own institutions, our own people, and our own solutions, Africa can not only survive, but thrive in the face of global disruptions.

Professor Olufemi Peters has been an active participant in the *MoodleMoot* Africa Conferences held in South Africa in 2023 and 2024, where the Founder and CEO of Moodle, Dr. Martin Dougiamas, delivered keynote addresses. UNISA, in collaboration with the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) and other strategic partners, hosted the 2023 edition from August 20 - 22 at the Emperor'S Palace, Johannesburg. These gatherings served as critical platforms for sharing best practices to strengthen the quality of online education and training



on Moodle, the leading open-source Learning Management System (LMS) that underpins much of Africa's ODeL ecosystem.

The UNISA, OUT, NOUN, Namibia University of Technology, and other universities took a bold step in formally affiliating with Moodle, signalling a commitment to shape the future of online learning in Africa. At both conferences, Professor Peters graced the gala dinners as the keynote speaker and challenged UNISA to lead the ODeL efforts across the continent, urging the institution to mentor emerging universities and foster continental networks for innovation.

The 2023 *MoodleMoot* Conference coincided with UNISA'S 150th anniversary as Africa's longest-serving distance education university. The celebration, which brought together the ODeL institutions, reaffirmed a collective understanding that digitisation and digitalisation are key enablers of teaching, learning, research, and innovation. Success in these domains, however, depends on a culture of sharing best practices and bringing together resources for greater impact.

The 2024 *MoodleMoot* Conference, hosted again by UNISA in collaboration with *MoodleMoot* Africa Association universities, was themed *Moodle Education Technology Platform: Uniting African Universities to Reclaim Africa's Intellectual Futures and Create Sustainable African Solutions*. Participants were urged to reflect deeply on the validity and resilience of open and distance learning systems in the rapidly evolving AI landscape. Questions were posed on how universities can shift from being peripheral consumers of technology to active creators of digital solutions, leveraging AI to improve assessment processes, enhance inclusivity, and redefine the quality of higher education across Africa.

The journey to be taken together was made clear - to build sturdy governance structure, secure sustainable funding, and continue leveraging educational technologies to transform the lives of African youth. With the commitment of its member universities and the support of the wider academic community, *MoodleMoot* Africa has positioned itself as a catalyst for long-term change on the continent.



Yet, as these conversations unfold, as African academics, we cannot ignore the geopolitical realities of our time. The world continues to view Africa as a repository of raw materials, too often stripped bare of its wealth, leaving barren land and impoverished communities behind. To change this narrative, African universities and innovators must become producers of knowledge and creators of digital products that place Africa at the forefront of digitisation and digitalisation. By doing so, the continent can move beyond dependency to claim its rightful place as an equal partner and even a leader in the global knowledge economy. The future success of Africa rests in our hands. We must rally together with purpose and determination to shape a brighter tomorrow - the brighter tomorrow that inspires the coming generations to remain hopeful and confident in the endless possibilities before them. Universities must advance together with their communities, recognising that isolated knowledge gains or individual wealth will not deliver peace and socio-economic stability. We are, and must remain, the model of knowledge production, working in partnership with governments, industries, and other universities, both within and beyond the continent, for the benefit of humanity.

The 2025 *MoodleMoot* Conference in Abuja, Nigeria, 8 – 10 October, offered yet another opportunity for African universities to support one another, to participate in dialogue, and to learn alongside like-minded institutions committed to the progress of Africa and the world. Guided by the conviction of the late President Nelson Mandela of the Republic of South Africa that “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”, we must continue to harness education and technology as tools of liberation, innovation, and shared prosperity for the continent and beyond. We must use education to bring everlasting peace, security, and hope to Africa. We must hold high the words of a great African intellectual and literary icon, Ayi Kwei Armah, who reminds us in his novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, that Africa will thrive when we collectively work together, stating, “Alone, I am nothing. I have nothing. We have power. But we will never see it work unless we come together to make it work.”



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