Open and Distance Learning Amidst Covid-19 Pandemic: Some Lessons Learned and Emerging Initiatives

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Introduction

I am most delighted to welcome you to the 6th ACDE Conference. I feel particularly elated to welcome to this Conference, Ghana's Minister of Education, The Honourable Dr Yaw Osei Adutwum. Similarly, it is my privilege to welcome His Excellency Chief Olusegun Aremu Okikiola Obasanjo, former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, under whose leadership the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was resuscitated. I say thank you sir for your outstanding contributions to NOUN, and by extension to the development of Open and Distance Learning in Africa. All of the great strides achieved would not have been possible if you had not resuscitated the University. It is a testimony of your enduring legacy that NOUN is today, one of the largest distance learning universities on the African continent. I acknowledge the contributions of Emeritus Professor Olugbemiro Jegede as one of the founding fathers of this great organisation and who is also a goodwill ambassador for ACDE. I also wish to thank the President ACDE, who is also the President of the Laweh Open University Ghana, and the Association of African Universities (AAU) for co-hosting the 6th ACDE Triennial Conference. Our gratitude goes to the ACDE Executive Board for their relentless efforts and to the entire members of the Organising Committee who have been working tirelessly with the ACDE Secretariat in Nairobi to make the 6th ACDE Conference a reality, despite the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I also wish to commend the Vice-Chancellors, Rectors, Presidents and other leaders of higher educational institutions, policymakers, development

agencies, scholars, students, education professionals, educational technology investors, and the private sector present for their commitment to sustaining open and distance learning, in one form or the other, on the African continent. This conference is unique in that it is the first for the ACDE since the onset of the pandemic. As you are aware, the pandemic has radically changed the face of the education sector by making teaching and learning even more challenging than it ever was. At the same time, the pandemic also offers us an opportunity to review and share experiences on the progress made towards the fulfillment of the goals of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa, SDG4. and the critical role that ACDE needs to play going forward.

Evolution of Open and Distance Learning

Open Distance and Learning (ODL) model of educational delivery, as a system designed to bridge the transactional distance between the teacher and learner who are separated in time and space, has gone through many stages of development. Originating from correspondence studies, this model of educational delivery has evolved into the use of interactive self-learning content facilitated by technology. Today, with the increasing use of technologies to learn, and a combination of ODL with conventional face-to-face learning, ODL manifests itself as online and blended learning used by both ODL and contact institutions, hence the label, open, distance, and eLearning (ODeL).

One fact is certain, although the technologies used for open and distance learning may change over time and contexts, the principles remain the same- access, equity, and quality.

Indeed, a former president of the University of Chicago, William Rainey Harper (1885) had predicted that:

"… the day is coming when the work done by correspondence will be greater in amount than that done in the classrooms of our academics and colleges; when the students who shall recite by correspondence will far outnumber those who make oral recitations" (Watkins 1991). This prediction of Harper has been validated in the light of the emerging changes in the social and economic dimensions of educational provision from the traditional face-to-face mode to

distance education. This need has, therefore, driven countries to seek for the appropriate, cost-effective, and innovative means to respond adequately to the unmet demand for education.

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of distance education has become more important than ever before. Indeed, the boundaries between contact and ODeL institutions, which led to pivoting remote, online, and blended learning, are blurred suggesting a convergence of educational delivery. Open institutions are primarily dependent on media and technology for the delivery of their operations in teaching and learning.

COVID- 19 Pandemic and its Impact on Teaching and Learning

COVID-19 has impacted the world like no other event in this generation's history. With several million deaths recorded, precautionary measures were put in place including total lockdowns at various times in many countries, schools were shut down across the world. The pandemic exposed the fault lines of many education systems across the world. UNESCO (2021) reports that over 1.5 billion students from pre-tertiary to tertiary education were affected as the pandemic interrupted learning for 9 out of 10 students globally. While the pandemic has accelerated the use of technology as education systems pivoted to remote learning, the attendant issues of inclusion come into focus as many learners face barriers to online learning. In sub-Saharan Africa, 89% of learners do not have access to a household computer; 82% do not have access to household internet, and 11% are not covered by mobile networks. Yet, the skills and competencies required of the 21st-century workforce are hinged on these especially as technology advances and more jobs are becoming digitised. These challenges need to be addressed.

Africa, like other continents of the world, has developed strategies and initiatives to improve the quality of life of its citizens. There is the African Union's Agenda 2063,' the blueprint and master plan for transforming Africa into the global powerhouse of the future. To achieve this, the African Union has developed a comprehensive ten-year Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) that is driven by the desire for a qualitative system of education and training that will

provide the continent efficient human resources that are adapted to Africa's core values and aspirations. The initiative is primarily aimed at developing knowledge, competencies, skills, innovation, and creativity that are required to nurture African values and promote sustainable development at the national, regional, and continental levels. The Africa Union's aspirations for an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa that is driven by its citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena, align with the provisions of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' by 2030.

It is also a concrete manifestation of the pan African drive for unity, self-determination, progress, and collective prosperity which is pursued under the Pan Africanism and African Renaissance. But how do we achieve this? One of the recommendations in the Framework for Action for achieving Goal 4 by 2030 is to 'develop policies and programmes for the provision of quality distance learning in tertiary education, with appropriate financing and use of technology, including the Internet, massive open online courses and other modalities that meet accepted quality standards to improve access'. This, I believe is where open distance and eLearning on the continent has a crucial role to play.

According to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, "Africa is the world's youngest continent with around 60% of the population currently under age 25. Between now and 2100, two generations from now, Africa's youth population is expected to increase by more than 180%, while Europe's and Asia's will shrink by more than 21% and by almost 28%, respectively. By the end of the century, Africa's youth population will reach 1.3 billion people, double the expected total population of Europe, and will represent almost half of the world's youth. If Africa is the continent of the future, youth is the future of the African continent. What sustainable plans and framework for action are in place to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities for this army of youth that is certain to emerge on the African scene in the coming decades?

This is where the African Continental Educational Strategy and the ACDE become central to Africa's future aspirations. The African Council for Distance Education has a very crucial role to play as the lead educational organisation for the African Union on Open and Distance Education, in the actualization of the Union's continental initiatives.

The African Council for Distance Education (ACDE)

The ACDE was established to promote open, distance, and eLearning as a means of widening access to higher education on the continent, address the issue of quality through benchmarking of ODeL practices, contribute to research and policy issues, and foster collaboration among its members. It is pertinent to note that ACDE is the lead organisation to the African Union on open and distance learning. The existence of such a body could not have been better, at such a time when the mainstreaming of ODeL has been accelerated due to the shift to online learning arising from the impact of the pandemic on education.

The ACDE is best positioned to expand its scope through its strategic initiatives by providing the much-needed guidance to countries and institutions on the uptake and practice of distance and online learning and contribute to meeting the SDG goal 4 of assuring inclusive and quality education.

The ACDE's strategic initiatives are:
a)   African Council for Distance Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (ACDE QAAA) hosted at the National Open University of Nigeria
b)   African Council for Distance Education Technical Committee on Collaboration (ACDE TCC), hosted at Open University of Tanzania;
c)   African Council for Distance Education Information and Communications Technology (ACDE ICT), hosted at Open University of Sudan; and
d)   African Council for Distance Education ODL Database (ACDE ODL database) hosted by The University of South Africa.

The ACDE, through its strategic initiatives responded to the needs of institutions in the wake of the pandemic by providing training, to enable learning to continue, despite restrictions on face-to-face contact. These interventions include:

- The ACDE in collaboration with the Open University, UK, organised a continental training programme on skills for '21st-century teaching and learning', and on 'Taking your course online'. The courses were held online from July to September 2020. Indeed, this initiative was highly successful, where over 1,761 teaching and non-teaching staff from over 18 African countries participated to upskill for a technology-enabled environment.
- A Commonwealth of Learning sponsored a Train-the-Trainers Workshop on Quality Assurance for Teacher Training and Professional Development, which was coordinated by the ACDE Secretariat and held at the Open University of Tanzania;
- A workshop organised by the ACDE Information and Communications Technology using technology for teaching and learning providing skills for teaching and learning including online assessment and project defense.

These initiatives, in the wake of the COVID, should play greater roles in ensuring that our institutions receive adequate training in the use of ICTs to cope with the challenges of the new realities, leverage institutional areas of expertise through collaboration; and equip institutions to offer quality ODeL programmes.

Lessons learned amidst the pandemic

The alignment of the ACDE strategic initiatives with the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) initiative of the African Union, and the SDG 4 of the United Nations is particularly important in the light of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the education sector.

1. **Building capacity of Faculty for online environments.** The need for training of staff for online environments is one of the key issues identified in the wake of the pandemic. The continental training programme organized by the ACDE in

collaboration with the Open University, UK, on skills for 21st-century teaching and learning and on designing content for teaching online was one of the organisation's highly commendable interventions. One key lesson learned from the exercise is the need to design content specifically for online and blended learning with a focus on pedagogy and design. Governments and institutions need to continue to invest in building the capacity of staff in order to meet their stated objectives.

At the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), we also found this to be true. Despite the closure of the physical doors, NOUN was able to continue with significant levels of online facilitation and assessment of its programmes because it had made strategic investments in training and capacity building of staff over time. Investment in digital infrastructure, especially a Learning Management System (LMS), is also an important need and lesson learned. These investments enabled NOUN to be able to continue with significant levels of online facilitation and assessment of its programmes. The NOUN also embarked on massive re-orientation of its different categories of workforce through online training at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

2.   **Design, digitisation, and delivery of content premised on open and distance learning principles** are critical to the success of online teaching and learning. Reports abound of attempts to replicate face-to-face classroom teaching in online environments. In addition, the literature shows that blended learning, a combination of online learning and face-to-face provision, works best in developing countries (Kanwar, 2020). Through its dedicated directorate that is responsible for digitising content for online delivery, we have at NOUN embarked on the redesign of all our programmes for online and blended delivery, having successfully achieved this for a good number of our courses. The pandemic has simply served to underscore the imperative nature of the exercise.

3. **Assessment.** How to conduct quality assessments in online assessments became a global issue in midst of the pandemic. Lessons learned from the deployment of a completely online proctored examination for the first time for students at all levels amidst the pandemic revealed the following:

    i. There is a need to ensure **inclusive and equitable solutions** in designing assessments for online environments. It has been suggested that emphasis should be laid on formative assessments and other alternative forms of assessment so that learners have options. The feedback from the exercise showed that although all students originally opted for virtual examinations, only about 25% finally took up the option when the conditions for the conduct were provided. The conditions were: a laptop with a webcam; good internet connection; a noise-free environment; a source of stable power supply; familiarity with the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE); and digital literacy. On a survey, about 40% of students requested for continuation of virtual examinations.

    ii. The findings also underscore the challenges of ensuring inclusion and equity; support for learners to acquire **digital literacy skills as well as learning how to learn online**;

    iii. With the shift from physical classrooms to virtual classrooms and attendant increase in the use of technology for teaching and learning, the education sector faces the challenge of an increase in cyber security, the safety of data information, and digital devices.

    These challenges of **cyber security as well as policy guidelines** for malpractice in online proctored examinations need to be addressed.

4. **Quality assurance** measures for online learning have become more important to assure the use of ICTs for teaching and learning. The ACDE through its strategic initiative, ACDE

QAAA has developed a quality assurance toolkit and a quality
assurance policy and framework template to engender good
practices and to promote a culture of quality in ODeL. The tool
kit encourages the development of relevant policies including
an eLearning policy as a means of ensuring the quality of online
learning provisions. NOUN's first eLearning policy which was
developed in 2008 helped set the trajectory of the institution's
digital transformation journey. **Institutions need to develop
eLearning policies to guide their deployment of ICTs for
online teaching and learning based on sound distance
learning principles.** It is expected that this will be one of
ACDE QAAA's key training objectives going forward.

Emerging Initiatives

The pandemic has forced us to innovate, think 'out of the box', and to
reimagine how as open and distance learning practitioners, we can do
things differently to overcome the challenges of leveraging technology
for education on the continent. I would like to highlight some emerging
initiatives that need to be addressed at the continent level for the benefit
of all.

1. **Capacity building through collaboration initiatives among
   institutions for the deployment of technology to meet
   continental goals**.
As earlier mentioned, the ACDE organised some training programmes
for faculty in collaboration with other organisations and institutions in
response to identified needs arising from the impact of the pandemic.

These training opportunities will remain essential as institutions make
the transition from **traditional** distance learning to online, blended
distance learning. The need to also encourage institutions to support
their learners in learning how to learn online should be addressed. •

NOUN has engaged in building the capacity of the Faculty through its
training of facilitators, many of whom are from conventional
universities in Nigeria.

On the platform of its Centre of Excellence on Technology Enhanced Learning (ACETEL), a World Bank, AAU, and NUC-supported project and the NOUN-CISCO academy, a university-industry collaboration, NOUN is actively contributing to building capacity in digital skills in Nigeria and in the sub-region. Leveraging technology, the Centre was able to add value to the short courses offered by CISCO using a blended approach as well as train its ICT staff on digitising its content. We are also technical partners to Nigeria's regulatory body for university education, the National Universities Commission on the Virtual Institute for Capacity Building in Higher Education (VICBHE), which has been involved in building the capacity of staff of universities, and regulatory bodies across Africa. The Chairman, Governing Council of NOUN, Distinguished Professor Peter Okebukola is the Director of VICBHE.

2. **The contributions of TELCOs are paramount now that technology has assumed a more important role in the delivery of teaching and learning in the wake of the pandemic**

The pandemic highlighted and, in some cases, widened the digital divide as many were unable to continue learning remotely. Reports of weak IT infrastructure, lack of access to digital devices, poor Internet coverage, and high cost of data abound on the continent. Despite some progress that is being made with regard to internet coverage, the cost of data remains high in Africa and unaffordable for many. According to a UN report, and based on the premise that *'internet access is considered affordable when the cost of a gig is less than 2% of gross monthly income,… only 14 of the 48 African countries included in the ranking have affordable internet access'* (Africa Report, 2021). As mentioned earlier, the fully online examinations held during COVID-19 lockdown at NOUN required that only students who had access good internet connection and a source of stable power supply among other requirements were eligible.

Countries and institutions need to invest in ICTs. The challenges of the high cost of data and access to the internet are issues that can be addressed at continental and national levels, through the provision of free or subsidised data and access to educational websites so that

students can access learning resources free. The increase of learning virtually has contributed to an increase in cyber security threats. Thus, cyber security and examination malpractices are challenges that need to be addressed. Enabling policies towards online/blended learning need to be formulated and implemented. These and other issues that African education systems share should be addressed through continental initiatives that can be cascaded down to national and institutional levels.

3.   **Strengthening power supply through exploring smart energy mix provisions**

As rightly noted by the African Development Bank (2019), 'access to energy is crucial not only for the attainment of health and **education outcomes** but also for reducing the cost of doing business and for unlocking economic potential and creating jobs'. The Bank, which has as one of its five strategic goals to 'light up and power Africa' aims to leverage Africa's energy potential, especially renewable energy, alongside solar, biomass, wind, and geothermal energy, helping countries to develop capacity for smart energy mix approaches. An alignment of the AU's Agenda 2063 with the AFDB's strategic plan provides a template for collective resolution of this challenge at all levels.

4.   **Relevance of educational provisions for the future of work.**

The COVID-19 pandemic within the context of the fourth industrial revolution and attendant technological advancements has further disrupted how we work, creating the demand and need for new skills for the future of work. Higher education institutions are addressing this issue using various approaches including fostering closer partnerships with industry; developing institutional employability strategy frameworks that align with quality assurance policies, and blending their curricula with skill-based course offerings that are external to national and institutional curricula (e.g. Coursera). Countries and institutions need to ensure that graduates develop adequate transferable skills and competencies that are adaptable to different work contexts if we are to meet African Union's education goals as espoused in CESA and the SDG 4.

Conclusion

Even though the number of COVID related deaths have declined considerably due to various medical interventions and precautionary measure, and we are not certain when it will finally be over, it has changed the landscape of educational delivery forever. Online and blended learning is both the now and the future.

It is paramount that the ACDE utilises its unique position as the leading organisation in open and distance learning on the continent to do more to build capacity on the continent for online and blended teaching and learning. Our institutions, be they ODeL or conventional institutions should leverage the strengths we each possess for the common good of all, and especially to support our learners by improving on our delivery systems and achieve our goal of making quality higher education available, affordable, and accessible to all for the development of the continent. Finally, we must recommit ourselves to finding solutions to the sustainability of ACDE and its initiatives; we must increase advocacy to our stakeholders, forge productive partnerships within the continent, and across continents to achieve shared prosperity for all.

Together, we can take advantage of the window of opportunity that the impact of the pandemic has unintentionally opened to change the face of higher education provisions in Africa through open, distance, and eLearning, and achieve the ultimate goal of making Africa the continent of the future.

I thank you all for your kind attention.

Thank you