

**COMMUNIQUE ISSUED AT THE END OF THE THREE DAY FORUM
ON “A DECADE OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE
COMMONWEALTH: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES” HELD AT
SHERATON HOTEL AND TOWERS, ABUJA NIGERIA FROM
MAY 18 TO 20, 2009**

1.0 PREAMBLE

- 1.1 The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in collaboration with the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) held a forum on “A Decade of Open and Distance Learning in the Commonwealth: Achievements and Challenges” from May 18 to 20, 2009 at the Sheraton Hotel and Towers, Abuja, Nigeria. The organisation of the forum was also supported by other stakeholders including the University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, University of Lagos, NBTE, NMEC, NTI, UBEC, NCCE, and NCNE. The main objective of the forum was to identify the achievements and challenges facing Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in the Commonwealth and develop strategies to improve access, enhance quality and cost reduction in the next decade. The forum which was facilitated by UNESCO/COL Chair of ODL and Vice-Chancellor of NOUN, Professor Olugbemiro Jegede was attended by 146 delegates from 21 Institutions/Organisations and Government Departments from 13 selected Commonwealth countries including Botswana, Canada, Ghana, India, Mauritius, Namibia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa Tanzania and West Indies.

The official opening of the forum was performed by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar’Adua, GCFR who was represented by the Honourable Minister of Education, Dr. Sam Ominyi Egwu. The President/CEO of COL, Sir John Daniel presented the keynote address while the workshop facilitator Professor Olugbemiro Jegede, welcomed the delegates. The Honourable Minister of State for Education, Hajia Aishatu Dukku delivered the Honourable Minister of Education’s address while the vote of thanks was given by the Permanent Secretary, Federal Ministry of Education, Alhaji S.B. Ozigis on behalf of the Honourable Minister of State for Education. The Forum received goodwill messages from the Senate and House of Representatives Committees on Education through their Chairperson/Chairman, Senator Joy Emodi and Malam Farouk Lawan respectively.

A total of (9) plenary sessions were held with presentations of institutional/country reports and four (4) Breakout Sessions that addressed the following themes:

1. Advocacy, Policy, Mobilisation and Implementation of ODL
2. Use of ODL to promote Access
3. Achievements of and Challenges facing ODL in the Commonwealth;
and
4. Way forward – Blueprint for the next decade.

2.0 OUTCOMES OF THE FORUM

Participants at the Workshop:

2.1 Reaffirmed:

- a) education as the right of every citizen
- b) education as a public good
- c) education as the key instrument of change and development in any society;
- d) the 21st Century as a knowledge-driven century; and
- e) open access as a 21st Century imperative;
- f) ODL as the hub of educational and hence societal development;

2.2 Observed:

- i. the phenomenal growth of ODL in the Commonwealth in the last decade as championed and supported by COL;
- ii. the increasing contribution of ODL to the attainment of Millennium Development Goals and the Dakar Goals of “Education for All” (EFA);
- iii. the increasing use of technology in education delivery;
- iv. that ODL is a revolutionary instrument for breaking the “iron triangle” of access, quality and cost;
- v. increasing institutional collaboration and partnerships for educational resource sharing, pooling of academic talent and enhanced economies of scale.
- vi. the need for adequate funding of ODL activities by governments
- vii. adverse effect of poor public utilities on ICT-driven activities
- viii. absence of a continental/international agency for quality assurance and accreditation
- ix. the failure of most member states to tap into and fully exploit IT resources for ODL activities.

2.3 **Noted:**

- a) the low level of understanding of the concept of ODL by the general public
- b) the low level of advocacy of ODL mode particularly in the developing countries of the Commonwealth;
- c) the low throughput and the completion rates in ODL programmes;
- d) the need for more research on ODL in Commonwealth countries;
- e) the existence of ODL Coordinating Agencies in parts of the Commonwealth including India and Australia;
- f) the effort of some countries in the Commonwealth especially Nigeria and Ghana to establish Coordinating Agencies for ODL activities in their respective countries.

2.4 **Commended:**

- i. COL for its leadership role and for organising this forum;
- ii. UNESCO for its role in promoting ODL in member countries;
- iii. Nigeria for hosting the 2nd Council meeting of ACDE in December, 2008
- iv. Federal Ministry of Education, Nigeria and NODEN for hosting the National Workshop on ODL in Nigeria between April 27 and 28, 2009.
- v. Commonwealth countries who have made giant strides in education through ODL

2.5 **Agreed on:**

- a) a multi-layered and targeted advocacy with different audiences
- b) a definite policy on capacity building in ODL
- c) ODL-related organizations to network for information sharing
- d) establishing a data-base of ODL experts in the Commonwealth
- e) building a strong research culture in ODL given its complementary role in developing study materials and the opportunity to internationally benchmark our practice.

3.0 **CONCLUSION**

- 3.1 Following from the above, the workshop participants enthused with the achievements of ODL in the last decade and the pragmatic effort of Governments of Commonwealth countries to increase access to education through the instrumentality of ODL,

3.2 **Resolved:**

- i. to evolve and engage every available means that could engender effective advocacy for ODL, particularly in the developing countries of the Commonwealth in order to improve on its present level of visibility and acceptability;
- ii. to insist on implementation of relevant government policies by government agencies and personnel; and
- iii. to put in place an approved body of ODL experts which shall ensure an enduring cross border continental network for the maintenance of uniform standards and quality control of programmes, evaluation/assessment by way of periodic continental accreditation and quality assurance;

3.3 **Recommended the following as Blueprint for the Next Decade:**

- a) member countries should be urged to develop ODL policy to guide all ODL activities;
- b) member countries should establish Open Schools, Open Polytechnics/Colleges to increase access to quality education at all levels;
- c) set up inter and intra-institutional robust systems for effective ODL delivery;
- d) institutions should set up better evaluation and assessment techniques and methods that will key into Quality Assurance of ODL
- e) member countries should also establish effective and efficient 21st Century Learner Support Services;
- f) Commonwealth Governments should establish Coordinating Agencies for ODL in their respective countries and COL should support and assist these initiatives;
- g) COL should commence an aggressive capacity building and advocacy on ODL through regional and sub-regional organizations as they have done in the case of RETRIDAL;
- h) member state governments should collaborate and partner in the provision of ICT infrastructure in order to reduce cost and widen access;
- i) Commonwealth Governments and ODL institutions must promote research in ODL with renewed energy;
- j) COL should support ACDE in the establishment of the proposed regional ODL Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (ACDE QAAA);
- k) the establishment of Community Colleges offering associate degree programmes through flexible open education for the promotion of community-linked education;
- l) Commonwealth Governments should improve on the present level of funding of ODL programmes in their respective countries;

- m) COL and other development partners should encourage and support sub-regional collaboration and networks;
- n) there should be opportunity for transfer of course credits among Commonwealth Countries/institutions both in the conventional and ODL modes;
- o) other development partners should collaborate with and support Commonwealth agencies and countries in implementing these recommendations;
- p) The Commonwealth Heads of Government should declare a Day as the Commonwealth ODL day.

Signed:

Professor I.F. Adu, FAS

On behalf of the Communiqué Drafting Committee

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