

EDITORIAL

Open and Distance Learning for Development: How Can New Technologies and Distance Education Leaders Make an Impact?

Anne Gaskell

This issue of *JL4D* continues our popular series on Leaders in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) across the world, and it also includes major discussions of the Sustainable Development Goalsⁱ (SDGs), and how they can be realised in practice, particularly in the context of ODL.

Our two articles on Leaders in ODL come from very different areas – Asia and the English-speaking Caribbean and are, again, written by authors who are leaders in distance education in their own right.

Professor Santosh Panda, of the Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE), Indira Gandhi National Open University of India (IGNOU) has taken on the challenging task of identifying and summarising the contributions of leading distance educators across the whole of Asia. This is indeed a major undertaking and Santosh has wisely approached it by organising his contribution under eleven Asian countries which have played major roles in the development of ODL.

Professor Panda is of course very well known for his own major contributions to ODL and these are comprehensive. He has placed particular emphasis on the importance of teacher education and staff development as a means to ensure that faculty are sufficiently well prepared to support their students both in person and online. His research on faculty motivation to use new technologies and the perceived barriers to the use of e-Learning demonstrates that important factors are poor student Internet access, the need for increased training in its use and improved instructional design (Panda & Mishra, 2007). More recently he has written of the perceptions of faculty in terms of sharing knowledge and ideas through new technologies, and their preference for following more formally recognised routes such as publication (Santosh & Panda, 2016). Santosh quite frequently co-authors or edits publications and this is one illustration of his commitment to staff development and training; he has been a great example of collaboration around the world and mentorship of colleagues.

Santosh has also written and edited major works on *Planning and Management* (Panda, 2003); and is one of the relatively few distance educators who has really engaged with the economics of ODL. His work on *Economics of Distance and Online Learning* (Bramble & Panda, 2008) provides an extensive overview of management, decision-making and economic planning in ODL.

As a leading figure in Distance Education in India, with multiple international visiting professorships and consultancies across the world, Santosh is an ideal person to provide our summary of distance education leaders in Asia.

Dr Olabisi Kuboni, formerly of the University of the West Indies (UWI) Open Campus is also a leading distance educator in her own right and we very much welcome her contribution on the



English speaking (Commonwealth) Caribbean. Olabisi recognises that much of the early history of distance education in this context was delivered by external providers but she provides ample evidence of the growth of internally driven distance education initiatives and organisations in the last seven decades, which have culminated in UWI today.

Olabisi has been particularly involved in the development of relevant skills in distance and online education and the importance of learner support in this process. Her many publications include an analysis of support strategies to facilitate students' engagement with web-based learning in UWI (Kuboni & Martin, 2004), the preferred learning modes of online graduate students (Kuboni, 2013), and an examination of how easily students find it to source, select and extract information from the Web (Kuboni, 2012). The aim of the latter was to identify the best instructional strategies to assist students in developing effective skills for identifying, gathering and using information from online sources. From 2014 she has been leading a project *Building Learning Skills* which aims to design and develop online study materials to assist mature studentsⁱⁱ.

Much of Olabisi's work has centred on ODL in the Caribbean and the roles and experience of students, professionals and government. As early as 1988-89, she was a member of the Cabinet-appointed educational television task force in Trinidad and Tobago, and from 2005-07 was Deputy Programme Co-ordinator in the development and delivery of the *Online Certificate in Local e-Governance in the Caribbean* (UNESCO-UWIDEC initiative.) In 2012, she contributed a chapter on "A Parliament for the People" in *Evolution of a Nation: Trinidad and Tobago at Fifty* (2012) on behalf of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. Her input to government initiatives and policies has therefore been significant.

In recognition of her contribution to technology-mediated learning in the Caribbean, Olabisi was made an Honorary Fellow of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in 2013. She is therefore particularly well placed to provide our article on leading distance educators in this area.

It is also a great pleasure to include an invited article from Professor Andy Lane, of the Open University UK. Lane discusses issues that are core to the central focus of this Journal, that is the role of Open Education in meeting the SDGs, particularly Goal 4 to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". Lane argues that while SDG ambitions are admirable, the means to achieve them are unclear; indeed, some have argued that little has happened since 2015. To address this lack of action, he proposes a new theory of change, based on systems thinking, power relationships and open education. This has the potential to make a real impact on meeting the SDGs, and Lane provides an illustration of how this could work in a major project proposal based in Myanmar. His model provides exciting possibilities for how change can occur in the future.

The remaining articles in this issue support many of the themes raised above, particularly in terms of the importance of meeting SDGs through staff development, political and institutional support, and innovative technologies.

All articles in this issue are relevant to meeting SDG Goal 4, on education and learning, but Ferreira and Kamal focus particularly on SDG Goal 5 "Achieve Gender equality and empower all women and girls", in the context of child, early and forced marriages (CEFM). Their survey of 755 out-of-school girls affected by CEFM in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India examines the role of community

engagement in this issue and the impact of the GIRLS Inspire Programme.ⁱⁱⁱ Community engagement and family support are seen as important factors in breaking the cycle of CEFM and the GIRLS Inspire programme provides enhanced opportunities for girls.

The crucial role of teachers and academics in the use of new technologies is highlighted in two of our research papers. K12 teachers' awareness and perception of Open Educational Resources (OER) are discussed by Ozdemir and Bonk in the context of Turkey, while academics' willingness to engage in Open Educational Practices (OEP) are discussed by Nkuyubwatsi in the context of Rwanda. Ozdemir and Bonk found that Turkish teachers are generally aware of OER, and positive about their potential to improve student performance, but they were less familiar with licensing mechanisms. They also found that the time required to select and adapt OER was the greatest challenge to using them effectively. The authors' recommendations include greater involvement of the Turkish Ministry of Education in forming policies and procedures to encourage the use of OER and staff and professional development in their existence and use.

National and institutional policies were also found to be the most important enabling factors in the use of OER in Nkuyubwatsi's survey of 85 Rwandan academics and their willingness to engage in OEP. There has been some action in terms of the development of a national ODeL policy and strategic plans for the University of Rwanda; however, some academics still face challenges such as poor equipment, infrastructure and access to the Internet.

Three further articles discuss the use of innovative technologies in providing access and support to students. Access to the Internet is also noted as an issue in Samoa in an article by Chan Mow et al. They evaluate the usefulness and ease of use of the COL-developed Aptus^{iv} device, which allows access to digital and electronic resources in the absence of electricity or the Internet – for both students and academics. The results were very positive and the Aptus device is recommended.

Our final research article by Bozkurt, Karadeniz and Kocdar examines how social networking sites (SNSs) can be used to support learning, communication and interaction. They surveyed 2065 students at Anadolu University, Turkey and confirmed the extensive use of SNSs among students, particularly through mobile phones. However, some students were doubtful about using them for learning rather than communication and interaction with their peers.

Our report from the field by Abeywardena is also about the use of innovative technologies to support learners, in this case the development of a Mobile app to embed multimedia in printed ODL courses, using Quick Response Codes to develop *Print2Screen*. This will be of particular value to those in developing countries whose main access to the Internet is through their mobiles. So far, feedback has been very positive from selected learners in India and teachers in Africa. The potential for supporting the SDGs is huge.

Our two book reviews complement the themes of this issue. Senteni reviews the UNESCO-COL joint publication, entitled *Using ICTs and Blended Learning in Transforming TVET* (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) which is concerned with how ICTs can contribute to the increased need for and development of TVET in a changing world. The second, by Panda, reviews the book by JL4D Associate Editor Dr Sanjaya Mishra, entitled *Promoting the Use and Contribution of OER*, and this returns to some of the issues discussed in Lane's invited article and other research articles here. People are generally positive about contributing to OER but less willing to use them. Why? And how can

positive perceptions about the potential of new technologies be translated into significant results? These could help ensure the ambitious aims of the SDGs really have a significant impact. Lane's model is one way forward and the innovative approaches included here will certainly have a role to play.

Anne Gaskell

Chief Editor, JL4D

References

- Bramble, W. J., & Panda, S. (Eds.). (2008). *Economics of distance and online learning: theory, practice and research*. London: Routledge.
- Kuboni, O., & Martin, A. (2004). An assessment of support strategies used to facilitate distance students' participation in a web-based learning environment in the West Indies. *Distance Education*, 25(1), 7-29.
- Kuboni, O. (2012a). An analysis of the search skills of online graduate students as the basis for the development of appropriate instructional strategies. In J. L. Moore & A.D. Benson (Eds.), *International perspectives of distance learning in higher education*. Retrieved from: <https://www.intechopen.com/books/international-perspectives-of-distance-learning-in-higher-education/an-analysis-of-the-search-skills-of-online-graduate-students-as-the-basis-for-the-development-of-app>
- Kuboni, O. (2012b). A parliament for the people: constitution reform and the role of the parliament. In Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago, *Evolution of a nation: Trinidad and Tobago at fifty*. UK: Hansib Publications. Retrieved from <http://www.ttparliament.org/documents/2183.pdf>
- Kuboni, O. (2013). The preferred learning modes of online graduate students. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 14(3), 228-250. Retrieved from: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1462>
- Panda, S. (Ed.). (2003). *Planning and management in distance education*. London: Kogan Page.
- Panda, S., & Mishra, S. (2007). E-Learning in a Mega Open University: Faculty attitude, barriers and motivators. *Educational Media International*, 44(4), 323-338.
- Santosh, S., & Panda, S. (2016). Sharing of knowledge among faculty in a Mega Open University. *Open Praxis*, 8(3), 247-264. Retrieved from <https://www.openpraxis.org/index.php/OpenPraxis/article/view/317/221>

ⁱ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.buildinglearningskills.org>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://girlsinspire.org/>

^{iv} <https://www.col.org/services/knowledge-management/aptus>