A Decade of Development and Education in Africa: The Promise of Open and Distance Learning

N. Barney Pityana GCOB, PhD
Principal and Vice Chancellor, University of South Africa

Open and Distance Learning is an idea whose time has come. It is spearheading an innovative, technology-driven wave of education provision, both public and private, that is rendering international and national borders increasingly porous and challenging traditional and existing notions of dedicated spaces for face-to-face education versus so-called "distance" education. I say "education provision" advisedly, because as we all know, ODL is not confined to the higher education domain, or to the traditional dedicated distance education institutions. Its promise and possibilities are also being explored and implemented by many schools and residential universities that are faced with the same kinds of technological advances, constraints, dynamics and challenges as those that have caused traditional distance education institutions to turn to ODL models of provision. Parallel to that we find a burgeoning wave of private education providers who are also tapping into the promise of ODL. With its hallmark flexibility and adaptability, ODL is traversing new domains and opening up hitherto impossible opportunities for many whose circumstances would otherwise have consigned them to the graves of lost opportunity and wasted intellect.

Perhaps what we as ODL practitioners acknowledge and what we quietly celebrate, is that the growth of ODL is testament to the demise of exclusivity in higher education provision. The exclusionary triangle of access, cost and quality has been broken by technology and its evolution, allowing broad access to quality education at an affordable price. In short, the growth of ODL has facilitated mass access to quality higher education. It is how we respond to the opportunity that this presents, that will determine its, and our own, future growth and success.

Clearly ODL in Africa is being fuelled and driven amongst others, by an unrelenting hunger for education, an impetus for technical and intellectual advancement and an imperative towards human capacity building and training throughout the Continent that is as challenging as it is exciting. This is stated so eloquently by WEB Du Bois in his essay, *Of the Dawn of Freedom* when he says: "....for education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent. Nevertheless, *men strive to know*(1994:20) [2] , (my emphasis).

The status of higher education in Africa obviously continues to be cause for concern, and given Africa's education challenges and needs, we would be both remiss and negligent were we not to seize upon the promise offered by ODL and make every effort to ensure that it flourishes and produces fruit. Higher Education in Africa has less than a 45% participation rate and less than 2% in sub-Saharan Africa. Enrolment rates in Sub-Saharan Africa are by far the lowest in the world; up from just 1% in 1965 [3] to a current 5% [4] . The present enrolment rate is the same as that of other developing regions 40 years ago. Moreover, gender disparities have traditionally been wide and remain so. [5] South Africa's participation rate in higher education is 17%, and the aim is to reach a target of 20% by 2010. Compared to participation rates of over 60% in developed countries, African figures are dismal. In addition, Africa has to deal with an almost irreversible brain drain and a scientific revolution and digital divide that have left Africa at a competitive disadvantage. If, to that, we factor in the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS, then we know that equity and development in education could be but a distant dream or the promise thereof nothing but a mirage. Quite frankly, the amount needed for new investment in higher education is unaffordable and cannot match required levels, which is why ODL and possibly ODeL, are being seen as perhaps the only viable and affordable means of education, especially given the plethora of constraints that impede the rollout of higher education in Africa.

We are able to report though, that Open and Distance Learning in Africa has shown steady and incremental progress. (The term "distance education" is now generally regarded as being too restrictive, and probably even a bit outmoded, stressing as it does the distance between the teacher and the learner. "Open and Distance Learning" on the other hand, captures the evolutionary changes to distance education provision wrought by technology and concomitant systems.)

Initiatives towards ODL in Africa

The African Ministers of Education: The idea of the first ever all-Africa open and distance learning conference was put forward in Durban in 2002 when South Africa offered to host such a conference. In Dar es Salaam, in December 2002, the UNESCO Conference of Ministers of Education of African Member States (MINEDAF VIII) also emphasised the importance of ODL provision in addressing Africa's education challenges, and accepted the offer. The All-African Ministers Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education was held in Cape Town on 2 February 2004, and marked not only the 10th Year of South Africa's new democracy, but also a commitment to the reconstruction and development of Africa in pursuit of a better life for Africans. At that Conference, South Africa's then

Minister of Education, Professor Kadar Asmal, captured succinctly the acknowledgment of the role of education in Africa's socio-economic development, when he stated:

Our coming together at this conference is recognition that education and training is a crucial pillar, indeed the foundation, for the reconstruction and development of Africa. It is recognition that to educate our people is to invest in our development, as all the evidence suggests that sustainable economic development is dependent on an adequate and ever-increasing skills and knowledge base. It is also recognition that the role of education goes well beyond its contribution to economic development; that it is fundamental to building and ensuring a sustainable democratic society, as it provides citizens with the tools to understand the issues that confront them, enabling them to actively participate in the building and governance of our societies. [6]

The result of that conference was the Cape Town Declaration, which held out the promise of cooperation and partnership between distance education providers and those who shape public policy and higher education in government, especially public servants, experts, legislators and Ministers of Education. The impetus towards such cooperation and partnership was driven by the huge need for human capacity development across the continent, and the acknowledgement that decades of neglect and lack of investment in higher education had resulted in a situation where no single country in Africa could be expected to marshal the necessary wherewithal for the massive resources that would be needed for higher education.

The Founding of ACDE: To further the aims of ODL provision in Africa, the founding Conference of the African Council on Distance Education was held at Egerton University in Njoro, Kenya in 2004. The ACDE is committed to expanding access to quality education and training through open and distance learning. The idea of the ACDE was conceived of at a conference of SCOP, the Standing Committee of Presidents and Vice-Chancellors, under the aegis of the International Council on Distance Education (ICDE), held at the University of South Africa in 2002. At that time Africa did not have its own association of distance education providers, and participation by Africa in the activities of the ICDE was very limited. The 2004 founding conference was followed by the first ACDE Conference, also hosted by Unisa, in 2005.

ACDE sought to establish itself, with a secretariat in Nairobi supported by the Kenyan Government, as a coordinating centre, networking with all providers, ensuring available expertise in policy and training and as a resource to African governments and institutions. In addition ACDE is a network of scholarly activities through its proposed African Journal of Distance Education and regular ODL conferences across the Continent. But ACDE is greatly hampered by lack of resources, and the absence of major government resources which it hopes to overcome by a major marketing campaign. Frankly, one of the reasons ACDE is not attracting the much-needed resources is because available resources are being spread very thinly in projects that lack a strategic value as will be shown below. The ACDE's latest project initiatives hold out much promise. In February 2008, the ACDE held a stakeholders' workshop on an African agency for accreditation and quality assurance in ODL and a consultation on a Pan African Consortium of Open Universities. These initiatives have been met with enormous enthusiasm and they

will take the ODL project in Africa to even greater heights. This matter will be further developed at the 2nd ACDE General Assembly and Conference in Lagos, Nigeria in July 2008.

The Cape Town Declaration, the establishment of the ACDE, and other initiatives such as the launch of the African Virtual University, were all initiated mindful of the NEPAD commitments, to Education for All in Africa, as per the Dakar Statement, the Millennium Development Goals, the SADC Protocol on Education and Training and the AU's Strategic Framework on Education and Human Resources, 2015.

All of these mentioned initiatives offer an indication of the fundamental role that the University of South Africa has played, and indeed, will continue to play in advancing ODL on the African Continent and beyond.

The Second Decade for Education in Africa:
Further evidence of that incremental progress came with the adoption of the Algiers Declaration by the Second Conference of African Ministers of Education, in April 2005. The Algiers Declaration emanated from a review and assessment of the first Decade for Education, proclaimed by the OAU in 1996 for the period 1997 - 2006. The First Decade of Education for Africa focused on:

- equity and access to basic education;

- the quality, relevance and effectiveness of education;

- complementary learning modalities; and

- capacity building.

The Algiers Declaration then, saw Ministers making a commitment to, amongst others, the allocation of increased financial and other resources to education, the development of an action plan for the Second Decade for Education in Africa (with appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms), the mobilization of support for the strengthening of regional economic communities and other African institutions involved in education and the freeing up of ICT resources, particularly control of bandwidth and connectivity in Africa. The Declaration also acknowledged the role and contribution of UNESCO in African development efforts. [7]

The Second Decade of Education for Africa, Revised Plan of Action (2006) prioritised gender and culture; education management information systems; teacher development; tertiary education; technical and vocational education and training; curriculum, and teaching and learning materials and quality management.   Importantly, the Second Decade Plan of Action has been prepared by Africa itself, to the benefit of the entire Continent.

The guiding principles for the implementation of the Second Decade Plan of Action clearly articulate the intention to:

- garner political support at all levels;

- concentrate on strategic issues whose implementation will make a significant difference within member states and at a regional level;

- enhance mutual assistance;

- enhance the capacities of Regional Economic Communities and national implementation mechanisms;

- establish strong and effective monitoring and oversight mechanisms at all levels;

- avoid the creation of new structures by capitalising on existing structures;

- institutionalise the exchange of documentation, sharing and celebrating positive experiences and promising initiative among Member States; and

- Institutionalise collaboration and mutual support between countries, avoiding unnecessary duplication. [8]

In Summary: Clearly, there is an articulation and assertion by Africans of their intention and their right to take ownership of, and define their own education needs and processes. I think that if one were to reflect on much of what emanates from Africa today, be it socio-economic or political, one would notice a similar assertion of independence and autonomy. To me, these guiding principles are positive in the sense that they provide a very realistic, strategic and practical expression of what needs to done to achieve our educational goals in Africa.

An examination of the programme of the 2nd ACDE Conference and General Assembly held in Lagos, Nigeria, at the National Open University of Nigeria, from 8 - 11 July 2008, not only re-emphasizes Africa's reliance on and commitment to ODL but it also reflects that sense of realism and practicality, as well as a congruence with African thinking, on the educational priorities for out Continent. It highlights six sub themes, namely:

- Open and Distance Learning and Teacher Development

- Meeting the Challenge of the Millennium Development Goals: Role Potential and Impact of ODL

- Capacity Building in Open and Distance Learning

- Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning

- Collaboration and Partnerships in Open and Distance Learning: Models, Challenges and responses

- E-learning and Open Distance Learning in Developing Nations: problems and prospects

The last theme touches on e-learning and the acknowledged role that it too can play in Africa, for very much the same reasons as ODL. In that regard it is interesting to note the successes and failures of the most notable e-learning initiative in Africa, that is, the African Virtual University.

The African Virtual University

The African Virtual University was established in 1996 as a project of the World Bank. The official launch of the project in Africa took place in Addis-Ababa in February 1997. AVU was originally conceptualized as a technology-based distance education network to bridge the digital divide in Africa, especially by building capabilities in science and engineering. The delivery model integrated satellite and Internet technologies, allowing the provision of quality content from all over the world, while taking into account the technological and infrastructure limitations prevailing in Africa. Grants of close to US$200,000 were provided by the World Bank to each of the six participating countries for the implementation stage. The grants were used to purchase AVU satellite receive terminals and basic equipment to start up the AVU project in twelve universities. Universities that joined subsequently did not all receive grants, which resulted in diverse development among sites. [9]

The original objectives of the AVU were to complement and strengthen the ongoing efforts to:

- increase access to tertiary and continuing education in Africa by reaching large numbers of students and professionals in multiple sites simultaneously;

- improve the quality of education by tapping the best African and global academic resources, and by offering training to academics in African universities to prepare teaching materials for delivery through the AVU network;

- contribute to bridging the digital divide by improving connectivity in AVU learning centres and host universities, and by providing training in engineering, computer science, IT and business;

- serve as a catalyst for new investments and economic development by offering skills training and upgrading for professionals, and contributing to improving skills of the labour force;

- build the capacity of African tertiary education institutions and their faculty for better management, financial sustainability and extension of their reach through delivery of distance education. [10]

The development of AVU was foreseen in three phases: firstly to determine feasibility, using courses provided by institutions in the USA, Ireland, and Canada, and facilities of the World Bank, with the support of vice-chancellors; second, to establish 31 AVU learning centres in partner universities in seventeen African countries aiming to create more partnerships, train 23,000 Africans in journalism, business studies, computer science, languages, accounting, etc., and assess AVU's needs for providing sustained access to affordable quality education at tertiary level for Africans; and third, to expand to 150 learning centres in 50 African countries; introduce four-year degree programmes in computer science and business studies, both in French and English; and establishing AVU's own communications infrastructure: a hub, studio and VSAT1 at its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. [11] The assumption was that the AVU

would transition from a donor funded project to an independent self-funding university, with all programmes generated by African universities by 2004. [12] Clearly that has not happened. E-Learning has been plagued by the same problems as those that have so bedevilled roll out of ODL. I make mention here of aspects such as a lack of ICT capacity, limited and expensive access to broadband, connectivity, hardware, software and skills; a lack of government funding; no national ICT and DE policy development; poor, non-existent or outdated infrastructure; poor teaching and learning practices; and inadequate and inappropriate courseware.

The AVU appears to be having ongoing difficulty in acquiring resources, which is obviously impacting on its effectiveness.

The reality is that in the [seven - now 11] years of its existence, the AVU has gone from aspiring to be a virtual university able to confer its own degrees in science and engineering, to a technology-and-content broker facilitating delivery of diploma/degree programmes from international partner institutions outside Africa. By 2002 the idea of the AVU becoming an independent accredited university had been dropped altogether. For example, after 2002 students at selected AVU learning centres could earn a bachelors degree or diploma in business administration and computer science, or a certificate (or take short courses) in journalism, IT and Web site development. However these degrees, diplomas and certificates were all conferred by an international partner institution outside Africa. The first diploma (not degree-level) graduates did not appear until March 2005, when 140 students across Africa graduated with diplomas in business studies or computer science - a small percentage of the more than 24,000 students who had registered for course with the AVU by that time. [13]

The AVU again revised its plan in 2005 to collaborate with African HEIs rather than international institutions, the aim being to enhance their Open and Distance e-learning capacities. It will transition the conferring of degree and diplomas to African partners and establish learning centre on site at the partner institutions, with the intention of developing and delivering programmes. They will be expected to generate income and be owned by the partner institutions. (AVU: 2005)

In short, the AVU will now teach the very institutions it was trying to leapfrog how to do it was trying to do, but could not. Moreover, given the similarities between existing learning centres and the proposed ODeLs, it remains to be seen if these centres fare any better. [14]

Sadly the euphoria surrounding the notion of E-learning seems to have engendered the same kind of myopia that has so dogged other well-meaning donor efforts and initiatives in Africa. It is quite perplexing that by now there would not have been the acknowledgement that any such initiative should be accompanied by a well designed strategy that is calculated to circumvent the myriad problems which, given their prominence in World Bank and UNESCO Statistics and Reports, must surely be well understood by now. Well, recent reports suggest that Egypt's proposed e.University which was to have been launched this year is no longer proceeding, at least for now.

If one traces and analyses all the progress and development of ODL and E-learning initiatives Africa, as outlined above, there can be no doubt that there is a convergence of thinking: in regard to the role and function of ODL and ODeL in Africa; the main educational goals and focus areas; and the necessity for

collaboration and the sharing of resources and capacity to achieve them. The nexus I would suggest, is an emerging and growing sense of common purpose amongst African educators, evidence perhaps of that elusive "will," supported and driven by an understanding that we simply cannot fail. I would in fact go even further and suggest that ODL initiatives in Africa are gaining their own momentum and that there is a will to succeed despite the perennial problem of a lack of government support and funding and despite the various constraints and challenges that are so depressingly familiar to all of us.

The Prospect and Promise of ODL in Africa

What then is the promise of open learning and distance education? I would like to suggest that the promise of distance education is five-fold:

First, it facilitates and enhances access to education, in particular, tertiary education, through removing two key barriers to learning, namely, lack of funds and location. In this regard, it enables people to learn while they continue to earn, and irrespective of whether they are close to an institution, which is critical for people in rural areas.

Second, it is cost-efficient and is able to achieve significant economies of scale as it enables institutions to increase enrolments without increasing staff levels and associated physical infrastructure.

Third, it enhances and promotes quality through the development and provision of learning resources, which can be used by teachers and learners, irrespective of their location. This is especially important given the fact that in many of our countries our teachers are either un- and/or under-qualified and our schools and other institutions are poorly resourced in terms of learning resources, in particular, libraries and laboratories.

Fourth, it facilitates and promotes access to lifelong learning, in particular, ongoing professional development, to those who have obtained formal qualifications but who are required to upgrade their knowledge and qualifications given the increasingly important role that knowledge and the processing of information plays in wealth creation and economic development. There is no doubt that in the 21st century, education and training is not only about schools and universities, nor is it only about the young. No education qualification, whether it is technically or academically oriented, can be sufficient to prepare an individual for life given that the way in which we organise our societies, produce goods, and trade with each other is constantly changing.

Finally, ODL provides a basis for Africa to advance its development goals, to establish its social mandate. This can be done in part by providing an education model that could reach the non-traditional learners, especially women at home, the unemployed, the second opportunity learners, the disadvantaged. This could help bring within the economic and skills net many who may well have been left behind thud enhancing participation and democratising knowledge. There is another vital reason why ODL holds much promise for Africa. It provides options for new forms of learning that take account of indigenous knowledge and culture specific advancement of learning, creative and innovative means of assessment and an opportunity for relevance in education. This would be more affirming of people's prior knowledge

and skills, affirming of their culture, identity and human dignity, that draws from their history as a positive value and that cuts to size the prevalent hegemonies that have for far too long denied or undermined Africa's humanity.

The world has shifted from education for lifetime employment towards lifelong learning. Indeed, both the Education for All Goals and the requirements of NEPAD make it clear that our education systems have to provide meaningfully for lifelong education. This of course means that educational opportunity cannot be provided in traditional ways, requiring students to attend fixed locations at fixed times for lengthy periods. We have to provide opportunities that fit with the constraints and exploit the possibilities of the complex and demanding lives of the learners.

The promise of distance education can, however, all too easily be negated by bad practice, as bitter experience in relation to higher education in South Africa. In this regard, aside from the peril of technological determinism, which I have already discussed, I want to highlight other perils that we must guard against, including, amongst others:

- Emphasis on increasing enrolments, with little regard for the quality of the learning experience, or the number and/or quality of the outputs.

- Poor quality of the programmes on offer, which bear little or no relevance to skills and human resource development needs.

- Inappropriate approaches to curriculum design, development and delivery.

These perils are largely the result of the development of distance education programmes by educational institutions driven primarily by financial gain. This is unacceptable and should not be countenanced. There is hardly any point in pretending to open access to learning opportunities to students if there is little or no likelihood of them succeeding. We must ensure, if we are not to waste scarce resources, that the opportunities offered by distance education give learners a reasonable chance of success, and moreover, that the qualifications they earn will ultimately have value in their lives, or, more specifically, in the occupational market-place. In the final analysis, it is only a waste of precious resources.

Collaborations in ODL

As ODL practitioners, we need to guard against the twin dangers of promising too much and demanding too little. It is either that ODL and its prospects are overrated and presented as a panacea to all our Continental ills, or that, as many states appear to believe, it is presented as provision of higher education on the cheap or a s a short-cut method. Both of these are bound to discredit the project. In my view, however, the greatest danger to ODL in Africa is the diverse and uncoordinated, even competing initiatives. Africa's problem of colonial languages and the cultural determinants that come with it remain a bugbear for the Continent: Anglophone, francophone, Arabic and lusophone, are all phony divisions which Africans somehow prefer to perpetuate. To bridge such divides is very resource intensive. Second, various post-colonial interests continue to maintain a stranglehold on progress across the language

divides. For example, the agence universitaire Anglophopnie (AUF) recently announced that it had adopted 13 ODL projects in Africa initiated by 7 African countries to present 15 degree programmes offered via the AUF website [15], that, apparently without reference to any ongoing Continental initiatives or exploiting sound collaborations in Africa.

Unesco has also launched an e.campus initiative in partnership with the AU. India initiated a programme to supply broadband to selected African countries on the understanding that IGNOU would supply learning programme content to participating nations. There is much confusion in many such initiatives in Africa, in particular, as to whether e.learning should be spread wider or that emphasis should be placed on ODL even in its blended variety. In policy terms it seems imperative that this matter gets resolved because it must be understood whether e.learning will ever be the answer to the challenge of learning for development in Africa given the scarcity and the cost of broadband, and of readily available IT resources and expertise.

ADEA is also involved in ODL initiatives in association with AAU, and to some degree with the AU Education and Training Directorate. ACDE sought to persuade the 11th AAU Conference in Cape Town 2005 that ACDE be recognised as the agency of Africa's universities for developing distance education. While there was a muted welcome, not much happened in terms of collaboration between ACDE and AAU until early 2008, the initiative was revived and a MoU was signed with the Accra-based Continental body and collaboration with AU has been established. The result of all of this is that Africa's ODL initiatives are generally initiated and driven from outside the Continent as development partnership initiatives, almost always the initiatives are disperse and uncoordinated, even competing. ODL is in danger of becoming of mere passing fashion, until the next big idea comes along.

The University of South Africa (Unisa): A Case Study

Having highlighted the promise and perils of ODL, let us turn then to the role of the University of South Africa (Unisa) in the provision of Open and Distance Learning both nationally and on the Continent. Unisa is Africa's oldest and largest distance education provider.

Unisa is the only dedicated comprehensive ODL provider in South Africa. With a student headcount in excess 265,000 it is the largest HEI in South Africa and on the Continent. Unisa's 2015: An Agenda for Transformation, Unisa's ten-year strategic document, informs all of its operations and sets out the vision, mission and objects of the institution in a manner that has drawn widespread acclaim. Unisa has excellent infrastructure, cutting edge technology, innovative learner support systems and a significant regional presence in South and southern Africa. The institution is financially sound, very well resourced and well managed.

Having been through a highly complex and challenging merger process, and having laid a sound foundation through the establishment of new structures, systems and processes, it has now turned it sights firmly on its new academic identity and focus, with the aim of ensuring quality programmes that reflect

its it African-ness in line with its social mandate and responsibility. To that end its Programmes and Qualifications Mix is undergoing a fundamental revision, both to ensure compliance with the newly proclaimed HEQF and its Africa-oriented African identity, as are its learner support and assessment processes. It is a particularly dynamic and exciting time. The institution is currently preparing for its first formal HEQC audit, but its is well prepared and quietly confident, having had the foresight to undergo a trial audit last year, kindly facilitated by the Commonwealth of Learning.

Last year marked the establishment of Unisa's first learning centre outside South Africa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a project of collaboration with the Government of Ethiopia. This centre is growing at an unprecedented rate and a significant amount of interest is being generated from other countries in Africa, who are seeking similar types of collaboration.

Southern Sudan: Unisa is also involved in other continental activities. In its capacity as the Chair of the Ministerial Committee on Post Conflict Reconstruction in Southern Sudan, the South African Government, at the request of the SPLA/M Government of Southern Sudan, and with funding provided by South Africa's Department of Foreign Affairs, requested that the University of South Africa embark on a very comprehensive programme for development, training and capacity building of the people of Southern Sudan. A delegation of Ministers from member states went on a fact-finding mission to Southern Sudan in March 2005. A Comprehensive Strategy for Post Conflict Reconstruction in the Sudan was then developed by the Ministerial Committee. The programme was designed by a committee made up of Unisa, the Department of Foreign Affairs of South Africa as advisors, and the SPLA/M focal point at ministerial level. The SPLA/M delegates then had the programme approved by SPLA/M, and they identified the training needs and the candidates for such training. Unisa, for its part, developed the training programme and certificated those who achieved the agreed standards. The focal point for the programme within Unisa is the Centre for African Renaissance Studies.

The programme commenced in February 2005, with a high-level visit to Southern Sudan and consultations with the leadership of SPLA/M. Afterwards, a delegation of the leadership visited Unisa to explore facilities. The first group came for a period of six weeks in March/April to attend a specially designed course on diplomatic training. Other courses on civil service and public administration followed. On this occasion, candidates were paired with various government departments under a supervisor, to observe and to learn all aspects of public administration. There was another session on the justice system, the judiciary, and the magistracy; and another on law enforcement agencies like military, policing, corrections service, security. The programme is continuing but my information is that more than 500 Southern Sudanese have attended one or more of these courses since 2005. The purpose of these initiatives is to enable the people of Southern Sudan to take charge of their government with speed and efficiency, and to be knowledgeable participants in the Government of National Unity. The programme is coordinated by the Centre for African Renaissance Studies, is interdisciplinary and practical by nature, but has built in theory and case studies. This programme has been welcomed and appreciated by SPLA/M, and for some of them, it may provide a bridge to further academic studies.

Developments in Teacher Education:
Unisa is also involved in teacher education in Africa, in particular, NEPAD's Human Development Education initiatives. NEPAD's 2006 progress report [16] reports *inter alia*:

- *For the Distance Education and Teacher Training and Development Project;* baseline studies have been undertaken in Angola. Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Mozambique in collaboration with UNISA (University of South Africa), AVU (African Virtual University) CoL (Commonwealth of Learning) [17] and NOUN (National Open University of Nigeria), with a funding support form the Japanese International Corporation Agency (JICA).

More recent developments in regard to teacher training include expressed interest from South Africa's Department of Education for Unisa to drive very significant teacher training and upskilling initiatives, and it would appear that this is an area that will see significant growth and development in the institution in the near future.

What is becoming evident is that Unisa is playing a growing and active role in ODL facilitation and provision in Southern Africa and in the Continent. We are seeing concrete results. In February this year Unisa, in collaboration with ACDE, hosted an ACDE Stakeholder's Workshop, which aimed at pioneering developments for collaboration in Open and Distance Learning, quality assurance and accreditation of ODL programmes in Africa. The workshop was an unqualified success and lent impetus to the 2nd ACDE Conference, which I have already mentioned. It also testified to a growing commitment and seriousness in regard to ensuring quality HE provision for all Africans. There is a sense of optimism that the ACDE is indeed playing a valuable role in facilitating ODL provision in Africa.

Academic Identity and Focus:
In recent years Unisa has made a determined effort to concentrate and build its expertise in distance education. Council approved a strategic plan that identified ODL as a strategic thrust. Towards that end systems and processes at Unisa are under review, new technology is being introduced, staff training in ODL and in technology has been prioritised with the establishment of the Institute for ODL under the UNESCO Chair in ODL, administrative and academic processes are being refined under an evolving business and enterprise architecture. A process has begun for a major overhaul of Unisa's curriculum and the rationalisation of programmes and qualifications. At the heart of this review is the determination to give effect to our mission to become the African university in the service of humanity.

The curriculum at Unisa is being redesigned to reflect the institution's Africa orientation, as well as compatibility with ODL learning theories. Later in July an International Conference on Curriculum gets underway. The plan is that through such a review a determined effort is being undertaken to draw from African knowledge resources, to interrogate received wisdom in the light of African experiences and to construct knowledge afresh to reflect African intellectual and scientific aspirations. This is a big and ambitious undertaking. To give this a chance we are reviewing our assessment methods in the light of this methodology. We wish to ensure that there is no disjuncture between what we believe about human nature and especially Africa's destiny and what and how we teach. By so doing we are determined to bring to realisation the social mandate which our government has entrusted to us. More importantly we are beginning to address that matter of the qualities of a Unisa Graduate. That is a quality assurance

statement that arises from our solemn concordat between the state (and through the state, society at large) and the university, and between the university and the student.

We are signally reinforced in this pursuit by the knowledge that so many governments in Africa are fed up of universities producing graduates who bear no relevance to the nation's developmental and scientific aspirations, or about the poor return in investment or about society being short-changed on the social dividend that comes with a vibrant and dynamic, critical intellectual and scholarly class, or about the alienation so many of the new breed of graduates have towards their own societies, or often their abstraction from the challenges society faces. A grouping called the new generation universities that began, I am told, at the PCF in Auckland a few years ago proudly expresses disdain with the elitism of much of the traditional university, and is exploring ways and means of becoming relevant and responsive to the cultural, historical and other determinants traditional communities are aspiring towards.

You will understand therefore that I am very sceptical of much of what goes by the name of open educational resources because I do not believe that educational resourcing in Africa should ever begin by transplanting the knowledge hegemony unadulterated into situations where we should be vigorously interrogating and engaging our own knowledge resources, and then interrogate much of what we receive and not the other way round. You will also understand that, from experience, we need to be careful that partnerships and collaborations, or the aid package that we receive, should not simply replicate and perpetuate the standard relations of inequality. Africa should by now be very wary of becoming the mere minefield for raw materials and the consumer of finished products. We must hold the line that education is a public or common good, and that the trend towards commodification of education must not be accepted without question.

Conclusion

No one needs convincing in Africa any longer about the merits of ODL in enhancing the provision of higher education,, driving the development agenda, skilling Africa for sustainable development, and for meeting Africa's needs in technology and economic development. The challenge Africa faces is to be creative in planning and development, allocate resources as appropriate, appropriate intermediate technology, and establish regulatory machinery, an ODL Policy Framework that is as enabling as it is compelling. The second imperative for progress in Africa is a willingness to share resources across the Continent, build networks and collaborations that work. We must give notice of our determination to ensure that only relations of equality that affirm pride of place to Africa in the knowledge enterprise will have any value. Thirdly, development partners should by and large recognise capacity in Africa, understand the power of African initiatives, rather than generate competition for resources, or a proliferation of competing initiatives. Finally, Africa at all levels, must surely act consistently towards the realisation of the "big idea" espoused in the Constitutive Act of the African Union 2000 and in NEPAD that Africa must itself be the mechanism for its own development. Perhaps, we can once again capture the imagination of a Continent eager for advancement.

London, 16 July 2008.

REFERENCES

1. Keynote Address at the 5 th Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning of the Commonwealth of Learning held in collaboration with London University and UNESCO, London, 14-16 July 2008, under the theme: Access to Learning for Development.

2. WEB Du Bois.   The Souls of Black Folk. Dover Publications Inc, New York. 1994

3. The Task Force on Higher Education and Society (TFHE) (2000)):*Higher Education in developing countries: Peril and Promise.* World Bank, Washington DC.

4. Higher Education and Economic Development in Africa. David Bloom, David Canning and Kevin Chan. Harvard University. (2005) pg 5

5. Ibid, pg 5.

6. Asmal: All-African Minister's conference on open learning and distance education (02/02/2004) www.info.gov.za/speeches/2004/04020309461001.htm

7. Second Conference of African Ministers of Education (COMEDAF II) Algiers, April 10-11, 2005) stCom05/1/13.2

8. The African Union. Second Extraordinary Meeting of the Conference of Ministers of Education of the African Union (COMEDAF II+) 4-7 September 2006. Maputo, Mozambique. Second Decade of Education for Africa (2006 - 2015) Plan of Action . Revised August 2006. Page 2.

9. www.unesco.org/iiep/virtualuniversity/media/document/Ch10_AVU_Juma.pdf

10. www.unesco.org/iiep/virtualuniversity/media/document/Ch10_AVU_Juma.pdf

11. Ibid

12. Esther K Hicks - Can the African Virtual University Transform Higher Education in Sub Saharan Africa.http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/comparative_technology_ transfer_and_society/v005/5.2hicks.html

13. Esther K Hicks - Can the African Virtual University Transform Higher Education in Sub Saharan Africa.http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/comparative_technology_ transfer_and_society/v005/5.2hicks.html pg 3

14. Ibid pg 3

15. University World News-Africa Edition, 6 July 2008. The report goes on to state that "the involvement of higher education institutions in developing countries is a recent innovation in the agency's distance education system"

16. NEPAD A Program of African Union. *New Partnership for Africa's Development. Progress Report - Towards Development.* 8 February 2006, Pretoria, Republic of South Africa. Pg 11

17. The AVU, however, having first undertaken to participate, withdrew from the project.