

Speech for Official Launch of ACETEL



22 July 2019

National University of Nigeria, Nigeria

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Vice-Chancellor, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen. I would like to thank Professor Abdalla Uba Adamu for his kind invitation to the launch of the Africa Centre of Excellence on Technology Enhanced Learning. I have known Prof Adamu since the time we were students at the University of Sussex. He could be seen in active discussion at the centre of any group. As the Hausa proverb states: ‘ayi taffia ya fi zamma’ or an active and willing man can achieve anything. He continues to remain active and willing to contribute to the development of his country and I must congratulate him on successfully bringing this Centre of Excellence to the National Open University of Nigeria.

My organization, the Commonwealth of Learning, helps governments and institutions use technologies to expand access to quality education and lifelong learning. Our mandate is to work in the 53 Member States of the Commonwealth, which span all regions of the globe – from the Caribbean to Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Nigeria is an active member of the Commonwealth and provides financial and intellectual support. Thank you, Nigeria!

Over the years, COL has enjoyed a close collaboration with several Nigerian institutions, and NOUN has been one of our valuable partners. We share the common goal of promoting affordable quality education for all through the use of distance education and technologies, and we have been privileged to see NOUN grow from its early beginnings to become one of the key mega universities of the Commonwealth.

NOUN is a leader in open and distance learning in the region. It hosts the COL-supported Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL). It is one of the four such regional centres in the Commonwealth, the other three being in Botswana, Fiji and Malta. RETRIDOL has been playing a very active role in building ODL capacity in Nigeria and across West Africa.

NOUN also hosted COL's triennial Pan Commonwealth Forum in 2013 - with over 600 participants from 50 countries enjoying unique intellectual exchanges and experiencing Nigerian warmth, hospitality and generosity.

NOUN has also been a pioneer in developing and offering the first Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) in West Africa in collaboration with COL in 2016 and completed another only last week. Prof Adamu, despite his busy schedule, was an instructor in this course. This was possible in large part because of his personal leadership.

According to experts, including the Director General of Nigeria Information Technology Development Agency Dr. Isa Pantami, NOUN has always been a leader in embracing ICT. As a member of a six-country partnership in Africa and Asia, facilitated by COL, NOUN has played a major role in developing courses in advanced ICT skills.

Hosting ACETEL then is the natural next step for NOUN. It is a major milestone in the development of this institution and will further enhance the scale and quality of education provided even to the most remote and marginalized communities.

Unlike many 'graying nations,' Nigeria is a young country. According to a 2019 World Bank report, "children currently account for 43% of the population." By 2030, the working-age population which currently accounts for 53%, will increase to more than 60%. Brick and mortar institutions will not be able to cater to the growing needs of these constituencies. NOUN has an even bigger role to play in opening up access to higher education in Nigeria.

Access, however, is just one part of the equation. Even where there is increased access to tertiary education, there is high unemployment. Half the youth surveyed by a McKinsey report were not sure that their post-secondary qualifications would lead to a job—58% employers did not believe that new graduates were well prepared for work.

Technology too will have a significant impact on the future of jobs. A study at Oxford University found 47% of today's jobs could be automated in the next 20 years. Developments in Artificial Intelligence and Robotics will result in changes that we may not be able to imagine today. And in developing countries, automation will have an even bigger impact because of their dependence on labour-based manufacturing.

Developments in technology will change the nature of jobs and provide newer opportunities. Already we have seen that MOOCs are helping learners to find new jobs, become entrepreneurs and improve their skills. ACETEL will play a key role in preparing our staff and students for the future.

Because this is such a significant development, let me share three key lessons from COL's experience in technology enabled learning. First, technology is not a "silver bullet" that can provide solutions to all the problems faced by education. To deliver on its full potential, technology must be placed within a specific social, political and economic context. The costs and location of emerging technologies often disadvantages people in remote areas—what policies and practices do we need to put in place to ensure that we don't widen the existing digital divide?

Second, we need to equip learners to deal with an uncertain future. Three essential literacies have been proposed by Robert Aoun. First, the human literacy prepares students to perform jobs that only human beings can do. Human literacy will help them make ethical choices and will equip them for social engagement through effective communication. Data literacy is essential in a world driven by data. Learners must be able to find meaning in the flood of information around us. And technological literacy is essential if we are to understand machines and their uses. Learners must be able to use ICTs effectively to maximize their potential for livelihoods and success.

Third, we must also focus on moving from capacity to capability development. Prof. Amartya Sen proposes the capability approach, which looks at learning and acquiring skills not as an end in themselves but as steps that help individuals and societies achieve development outcomes. This approach encourages us to think beyond outputs, such as acquiring a degree, to outcomes—how this degree will lead to a better quality of life. Technology-enabled learning should focus on developing the capabilities within institutions for personal and national development.

I am confident that ACETEL will help foster innovations, research and thought leadership and will become an inspiration to other institutions within Nigeria and beyond. I would like to quote Professor Abubakar Rasheed, Executive Secretary of the National Universities Commission (NUC) and Chair of the ACE National Project Performance Review Committee. "Out of the 50 most innovative economies in the world, three are in Africa [...], he says. "They are not so because of oil or any natural resource, but because they invested heavily and wisely in education, particularly in research and development. We must do the same so that Nigeria can move from a natural resource-based economy to a knowledge-based and innovative economy."

As a long-term partner and friend of NOUN, I am delighted to be part of this historic event. COL and NOUN have come a long way and we look forward to accompanying you as you embark on yet another exciting journey. Once again warm congratulations to the Council, Prof Adamu and staff.