Open and Distance Education for Africans and by Africans

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By Sir John Daniel with Vis Naidoo (Commonwealth of Learning)

Introduction

I am delighted to be with you and I thank the conference organisers mostly warmly for fitting me into the programme even though I could not get here for the beginning of the conference. In the spirit of this Pan-African meeting let me begin with some remarks in French.

Tout d'abord je félicite l'UNISA et son recteur et vice-chancelier, Barney Pityana, pour leur accueil chaleureux et pour l'organisation de ce premier congrès du Conseil Africain pour l'Enseignement à Distance. Il y a plus de cinquante ans l'UNISA a été la première université au monde à offrir l'enseignement universitaire à distance grande échelle, bien avant les universités ouvertes, comme celles du Royaume-Uni, de l'Inde et de la Thaïlande qui ont mis ce phénomène sur la carte par la suite.

Bien entendu, dans la mesure où l'UNISA contribuaient, pendant bien des années, au renforcement de l'apartheid, elle manquait de crédibilité en dehors du pays. Toutefois, depuis dix ans l'UNISA s'est transformée de fond en comble en se donnant une nouvelle orientation politique, une philosophie pédagogique moderne, et de nouvelles modalités de support aux étudiants.

Je félicite tous les artisans de ces transformations et notamment le recteur actuel, Barney Pityana, qui, en plus, a réussi le grand défi de fusionner trois institutions de taille pour créer, avec l'Université Vista et la Technikon SA, une nouvelle UNISA. Cette nouvelle UNISA est appelée dorénavant à jouer un rôle exemplaire dans le développement de l'enseignement à distance à travers l'ensemble du continent africain.

In these remarks I hope that I can add a bit more to the value of this gathering and to your theme of

Mobilisation of African Leadership. In that spirit I have entitled these remarks Open and Distance Education for Africans and by Africans.

This address has been prepared with the help of my South African colleague Vis Naidoo. After a number of years of excellent service at COL as our policy specialist, Vis is returning to South Africa at the end of this month to head the MINDSET Network. Vis' career is a nice example of what should be a growing trend, namely the return of African leaders to Africa after they have acquired valuable experience outside this continent.

Mobilising African leadership, the theme of your conference, must include mobilising the huge African Diaspora by inspiring some of them to return to Africa and others to contribute to Africa's development from their new homes. Open and distance learning - most particularly the creation of open educational resources that I shall talk about later - provides excellent vehicles for doing that.

The Importance of Professional Associations for ODL

The creation and development of the African Council for Distance Education gives me special pleasure because I believe strongly in the value of associations like yours for nurturing leadership, improving professional practice, and giving greater prominence to open and distance learning.

I am proud to recall my own involvement in the International Council for Correspondence Education early in my career. With the emergence of the new wave of multi-media open learning in the 1970s a number of us thought that it would be healthy to change the name of the organisation and attract a wider membership to it. We made a proposal to the ICCE World Conference in Vancouver in 1982 and members decided that it should become the International Council for Distance Education. This did have the effect of broadening the membership in subsequent years, although distance learning within higher education became somewhat over represented.

I hope that you at the ACDE will work hard to grow your membership outside the university sector. Important though higher education is, open and distance learning for technical and vocational education and at secondary school level is probably even more significant for the development of your countries. Furthermore, as I shall point out in a minute, the techniques of ODL can be very helpful for important areas of learning that do not fit our conventional frameworks of levels of education.

I am also proud to have been involved in the creation of EDEN, the European Distance Education Network. This began when the Berlin Wall came down and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe realised that distance education could be a major part of the answer to their massive needs for retraining.

There had, of course, been extensive correspondence education in the Soviet Union, but it was a very directive and regimented form of distance education. Many of the dynamic educators in these countries felt that the modern philosophy of open and distance learning was what they wanted for their countries in transition. They felt that modern ODL was a metaphor for the more open and democratic societies that they were trying to create.

There already existed a European Association of Distance Teaching Universities. I was a member of this, as Vice-Chancellor of the UK Open University, and it was doing good work. However, many of us in Western Europe felt that what really mattered, in extending and improving the practice of distance education, was to provide opportunities for individual professionals to network, to learn from each other and get opportunities for professional development. This became the focus of EDEN and the Association has had a very beneficial effect in creating a community of practice for ODL across the whole of Europe.

I look forward to seeing ACDE establishing communities of practice that involve Africans and provide ways of involving the African diaspora to support education.

The Role of the Commonwealth of Learning

As many of you know, the mission of COL is to help governments and institutions to develop policies, systems and applications of technology for learning. In the last few years there has been a steady increase in the number of countries that have established policies for technology-mediated learning. Some focus specifically on ODL, some are oriented to the use of ICTs in schools, while others try to capture the use of technology across a spectrum of learning.

At COL we believe strongly in the importance of establishing policy, because it provides a considered and solid basis for developing the systems and applications that follow. That has been the focus of Vis Naidoo's work at COL and we are currently seeking a successor to carry on that important function.

I have noticed that when governments pay attention to policy for ODL and ICTs, then practitioners become more aware of themselves as a community of practice and create professional associations like the ACDE. In the last year COL has welcomed and encouraged the launch of CARADOL, the Caribbean Association for Distance and Open Learning, which in turn builds on the emergence of national associations like GADOL, the new Guyana Association of Distance and Open Learning, and JADOL, the Jamaica Association of Distance and Open Learning. So you are in good company. I wish the ACDE well and I pledge COL's support for your efforts.

What role for technology in learning?

All of us here believe in distance education and in the wider role of technology in learning. Why do we believe this? Let me take a few minutes to rehearse my own perspective on this.

I start from the observation that Africa's challenge of development, which Africans are now taking up resolutely through mechanisms like NEPAD, is largely a challenge of learning - formal and informal. Our conference theme is the mobilisation of African leadership. Leading and learning go hand in hand. But the followers must expand their learning too. What defines a developed country is the depth of education and training, that is to say the legacy of learning, of the population at large.

So the challenge is to provide more extensive opportunities for learning in the great diversity of fields that

define the functioning of a modern society such as government, health care, disease prevention, development management, teaching, business and entrepreneurship.

What characteristics must these opportunities for learning have? Three seem particularly important. They must be widely accessible, they must be of good quality and they must cost as little as possible. I find it helpful to think of a triangle defined by these three vectors of access, quality and cost.

When you do this you realise very clearly the limitations of conventional methods of teaching and learning. Suppose that you want to increase access, as some counties in Africa have done recently by making primary education really free. Much larger numbers of children come to school but the recruitment and training of teachers cannot keep pace. Class sizes increase and people will think that the quality of learning has gone down.

Suppose that you want to increase quality by providing more books and learning materials. The cost of schooling will go up which may mean that it can be offered to fewer people and access will go down. My general point is that if you try to improve one side of this triangle it usually changes the other two sides in undesirable ways. For this reason I refer to it as the iron triangle. It has been a straitjacket on the expansion of education throughout history.

The revolutionary feature of technology in general and ODL in particular, is that it can break open the iron triangle. You can increase access, improve quality and cut costs - all at the same time. This is because of the economies of scale and consistency of quality that come with using media. That is the good news.

The even better news is that these advantages seem to grow with every new generation of media. CD-ROMS and DVDs cost less to print than books. Distributing material on the Internet costs almost nothing once networks and computers are in place. The collaborative development of open educational resources is a particularly promising development for Africa.

Independent and Interactive Learning

I like to explain the impact of technology on the iron triangle by noting that learning takes place in two ways. First there is independent learning: learning that you do by listening, watching or reading. Most of our learning is of this type - the more so as we get older. People sometimes say that learning in a classroom or lecture hall is interactive, because there is a teacher present, but in reality most of the time in the classroom is spent in a one-way flow of information and you are learning independently.

Real learning requires more interaction than that. By interactive learning I mean a situation where another human being, who might be a fellow student, a teacher or a tutor, reacts directly to a comment or a question that you make. The moments of interaction can, of course, be very important. Asking a question can enable the teacher to clarify a misunderstanding. Even more valuable is when the teacher comments on or corrects something that you have done as a learner to demonstrate your understanding of a topic.

In the early days of distance education its great strength was to concentrate on the independent component of learning by producing quality self-instructional materials, almost always in print form. What did this do for the iron triangle?

First, printing has economies of scale - and that was even truer in the days before computers made it possible for us all to be printers. Once you have printed a thousand copies, the marginal cost of printing a few more is small, so that acts on the first two sides of the triangle. By getting the cost down you make it possible to increase access, because you can provide learning materials to more people. The potential effect on the third side of the triangle, namely quality, flows from these two. If you are producing in volume then it makes sense to make in the initial investment necessary to ensure that the materials are of high quality in both content and pedagogy.

These principles apply even more strongly to later forms of media, particularly the mass media. Once you are broadcasting a TV or radio programme it costs you nothing when extra people tune it. Provided that they have a TV or radio set it costs them very little too, just a little electricity. The economies of scale of the media and technologies of independent learning are the foundation of the success of the many open universities around the world that have done so much to put open and distance learning on the policy agenda of governments.

But the more successful open universities did more than produce excellent materials for independent study. Understanding that the possibly of interaction with teachers and the institution is vital if most learners are to achieve their goals, these universities set up systems for interactive learning, usually by making part-time tutors available to mark and comment on students' work, to answer questions, and sometimes to hold face-to-face meetings. Such arrangements are inherently more expensive per student than the independent learning media, but if the institution organises itself well there can be economies of scale here too.

The evidence shows that the combination of high-quality materials for independent study and effective arrangements for interactive tutoring is the basis for successful open and distance learning whatever media are used. As you know I spent nearly 20 years in open universities, including a decade at the UK Open University. By the time I left the UKOU to go to UNESCO in 2001 it was a pretty hi-tech operation, with 150,000 students online from home.

I should also note that by this time the UK Open University had risen to fifth place in national rankings of the quality of teaching in English universities. I also note that when students were asked which aspects of the University's distance-teaching system were most helpful to them, the printed materials and the tutors consistently gained the highest ratings.

The Internet

As Africa's leaders in distance education you need to remember that finding and not be too mesmerised by the new technologies that you don't have. Nevertheless, it is clear that electronic communication through the Internet can have a wonderful effect in speeding things up. Students like to get feedback on

their assignments as soon as possible and e-mail is inherently much quicker than regular mail - provided, of course, that the tutor also acts and corrects the assignment expeditiously.

Another great feature of the Internet, which is a relatively greater advantage for you in Africa where libraries are rare, is the wonderful resource of the Web, which just gets better and better. More and more people, when they want to find something out, simply go to Google or to that wonderful collective intellectual endeavour of humankind, Wikipedia. Then there are the increasing numbers of collaboratively developed electronic course materials known as open educational resources.

The advantages of online communication go well beyond formal learning. One of Vis Naidoo's key programmes at COL has been supporting Schoolnets/eSchools, particularly here in Africa. The advantages of school networking are not just the capacity for online learning but include the creation of communities of interest amongst teachers and new opportunities for professional development. This defines the primary purpose of a Schoolnet, namely to facilitate collaboration between school communities using ICT for educational purposes.

Africa has taken this concept of using ICT for schools and has been innovative in identifying models for teacher training to use technology for teaching and learning, using the school-based technology to support health developments within a community and to create a new cadre of African educators. Such indigenous innovations are important for Africa and vital for African leadership to support.

You must also realise that Africa does not always have to be a follower in the use of technology. I am sure you are aware of the many recent articles that claim that mobile phones are much more important to Africa's development than computers. Mobile phones are letting Africa leapfrog over a whole generation of infrastructural development in telecoms and create some interesting new applications. I understand, for instance, that using text messages on mobile phones to remind UNISA students of the due dates for assignments and the scheduling of examinations has been very successful.

ODL and ICTs in Development: Examples from COL

My key point, at this first meeting of the ACDE, is that Africans can and must take the lead in applying ODL and ICTs to the challenges of African development. I want to expand on this point by recalling some of the things that COL is doing with Africans in Africa to promote development across a spectrum of human activities.

Capacity Building

First, much of our work is capacity building, or helping to create the institutions and leaders that can make a difference.

For five years now, for instance, we have been bringing together groups of African vice-chancellors and senior university leaders for intensive residential sessions on management and leadership at the University of Abertay in Scotland. We are currently evaluating the impact of these sessions by surveying

all the alumni of the programme to find whether it made a difference to their work and careers.

In a similar fashion, the Government of Singapore has helped us offer training sessions to leading figures in Africa's teacher training institutions for a number of years.

We respond to requests from governments, most recently from The Gambia for example, to help them put in place a policy framework and structures for expanding and improving ODL. We are impressed by the emphasis that a number of African leaders are placing on the role of ODL in developing their education systems and are pleased to work to the priorities that they set.

President Obasanjo of Nigeria is highly committed to distance education and at his request we are doing everything we can to support the building up of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). We try to expand the benefits of such work to the adjoining region - in the case of West Africa by supporting RETRIDAL, the Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning. For southern Africa we are supporting SARDEC, the Southern Africa Regional Distance Education Centre at BOCODOL in Botswana.

ODL for Development

As well as our work in building leadership capacity, we are also working with Africans to test new approaches to the use of educational technology in development in the hope that some of the ideas will be powerful enough to be self-replicating. I can best give examples by running through some the Millennium Development Goals.

Hunger and Poverty

Let me start with the fundamental goal of reducing hunger and poverty. Africa's development will never take off until the rural people of Africa, many of them farmers, can improve their lives. Here COL is trying to address the paradox that there is a vast body of knowledge, arising from worldwide research on agriculture, which could improve their lives. It doesn't reach them partly because the agricultural extension services that might bring it to them are overstretched and partly because attempts to provide it to them rely too much on one-way communication.

COL's formula, which we are trying out in Africa now that it is beginning to show signs of success in India, starts with mobilising the village communities to help them develop a vision of a better future which leads them to formulate questions about how to farm better.

The local sources of information, notably the agricultural and veterinary departments of universities, then work together in a consortium to answer these often simple questions. The media for communication between farmers and information providers are the ICT kiosks that are present in an increasing number of Indian villages. Finally, and very importantly, the commercial banks make loans to the farmers and help to reorganise the marketing of the farmers' produce.

So far this seems to be working. Our aim is for the model to be so clearly superior to current practice that it replicates itself and this seems to be happening.

A study facilitated by COL with the University of Kwazulu Natal identified that radio is playing a major role in education and extension activities in Africa. Discussions with African partners in an international gathering during a meeting organised by COL and the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) in Uganda identified critical needs for improving the livelihoods of resource-poor (farming) communities.

Priorities should include firstly, raising awareness about the potential of ICT for community development; secondly, developing a consortia of new partnerships and participatory approaches; and thirdly, building human resources to develop digitised and localised content that can fit into any type of technology including for radio, which has shown promise, for broadband Internet that has significant potential, as well as in print media.

Partnerships for enabling learning for resource-poor communities should go beyond conventional educational and research institutions and include all stakeholders such as grassroots communities, civil societies, private sector, financial institutions and international organisations such as NEPAD, FARA, and the Consortium Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). We are now discussing such a model in Africa, with appropriate adaptations, in South Africa. In India nearly all the work in designing and launching this model was done by Indians. In Africa we are looking to a team of Africans to make it a reality.

Health

Turning from hunger and poverty to health, there are three Millennium Development Goals in health, addressing infant mortality, maternal mortality, and diseases like AIDS and malaria. Improving health services is clearly an important factor in achieving these goals. Almost as important, however, is informing the public about hygiene and disease. Indeed, we at COL believe that a massive increase in learning is a condition for the attainment of all the MDGs. COL's approach to learning about health is based on the obvious fact that people will pay more attention to information that is presented to them by their own people in their own culture and language.

We make this happen by what we call media empowerment. The simple idea is to equip community-based NGOs with video and audio equipment, train them intensively in its use, and then have them produce the messages. In Africa we have helped to make this happen here in South Africa, where an NGO called the Valley Trust in Kwazulu Natal has produced videos on HIV/AIDS stigma and taken them all over the province. This has led us into partnership with the World Health Organisation.

The model has also had success in The Gambia, where an NGO makes videos of dramatisations about disease avoidance created by peer health educators in the secondary schools. These videos are then taken out to the villages, using a simple system of projection that we call village cinema. Nearly half the

population of the country have now seen videos on HIV/AIDS and malaria and the Government of The Gambia credits the system with arresting the growth in infection rates.

Education

These applications of technology to facilitate learning that can reduce hunger, poverty and disease are important. Nevertheless, most of COL's work is in education, broadly defined. Here in Africa this ranges from a strong focus on new methods of teacher education through the capacity building work in higher education that I mentioned earlier, to the creation of Schoolnets.

Renewing and retraining Africa's teachers is the cornerstone of the edifice of Education for All that you are trying to build. I am delighted that an important conference on the use of ODL in teacher education took place here in Tshwane just last week and COL was proud to be involved in it. COL is very proud to have been asked, with InfoDev to conduct the monitoring and evaluation of the NEPAD eSchools Demonstration Project.

This is a multi-country, multi-stakeholder, continental initiative, intended to impart IT skills to young Africans in primary and secondary schools and to use ICTs to improve the provision of education in schools. The goal is that within ten years of implementation in more than half a million schools on the continent, the African population will possess the ICT skills essential for sustainable development. This programme is leading the way to Africa-wide thinking in education. As well as its role in monitoring and evaluation COL is pleased to be providing knowledge products and policy support to the NEPAD eSchools project.

Unlike some other development agencies COL has always taken a holistic view of education systems, believing it important to sustain and cultivate education and training at all levels. In this spirit we have never depreciated the importance of higher education.

A few weeks ago, before the G8 Summit, we worked with the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the Association of African Universities to convene a meeting of African leaders in higher education to develop proposals for facilitating the renaissance of Africa's universities in response to the enhanced interest of western governments in Africa's development.

Governance

Mention of the G8 Summit leads me to conclude these remarks by commenting on governance, an issue that permeated the report of the Blair Commission on Africa and the discussion it generated at the G8 Summit.

Some may think it paradoxical that there is all this talk about the governance of nation states at a time when the watchword is globalisation. Is not globalisation removing decision-making powers from governments because they are helpless puppets pulled by the strings of international economic forces?

I suggest that the answer to this question is a firm 'no'! For a powerful argument in support of this assertion I recommend a book by John Ralston Saul, who happens to be the husband of Canada's soon-to-retire Governor General, Adrienne Clarkson. Entitled: The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World the book argues that globalisation as an economic creed is a spent force and that governments are more important than ever. He argues that China and India have succeeded because of the strong role of their governments, not because of globalisation.

Africa needs more state involvement in national affairs, notably for the protection of citizens. This requires appropriate laws and strong financial and social institutions. A vital manifestation of healthy governance is sensible policy, consistently applied. We at COL would argue that policy to underpin the development of systems and applications that apply technology to education, training and learning is particularly important.

The African Council of Distance Education will be an excellent forum to examine and compare these policies so that states learn from each other quickly in this vital area and partnerships can develop. That is part of what I meant by my title, Open and Distance Education for Africans and by Africans.

I thank you for inviting me to address this important gathering and I wish you success in your roles as the leaders of a revolution in learning across Africa.

References

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