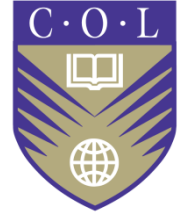


International Perspectives on Open Learning and Distance Education



*National Policy Consultative Forum on Open Learning and
Distance Education
KENYA*

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Introduction

Dr Kilemi Mwiria, Assistant Minister for Education, Permanent Secretary, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure to be here with you. This is my first visit to Africa in my new capacity as President of the Commonwealth of Learning and my first trip to Kenya in any capacity. I am only sorry that his Excellency the Minister of Education, the Honourable Professor George Saitoti, EGH, MP, had his travel plans disrupted and will not join us until tomorrow. However, I did see him in the UK two weeks ago.

Although this is my first visit to Kenya, I already feel that I know your country because I have worked with so many distinguished Kenyans over the years and particularly during my recent time as Assistant Director-General at UNESCO.

Your Honourable Minister, Professor George Saitoti, has played a most constructive and thoughtful role at various UNESCO meetings. I thank him for making himself available internationally despite his big responsibilities here in Kenya.

In my former task of coordinating the global drive towards Education for All it was a great privilege to work closely with Ruth Kagia, who became Director of Education at the World Bank the same day that I

started as ADG at UNESCO. Further back, in the 1970s, I first got to know another great Kenyan, Peter Kinyanjui, who has worked at COL and is now playing a vital role within NEPAD. Finally, when I was at Concordia University in Montreal in the 1980s I had the pleasure of supervising the research of Mary Ngechu, who is now at the University of Nairobi.

Mention of the University of Nairobi reminds us that Kenya has traditionally been a leader in distance education in Africa and has helped other African countries to launch their distance learning systems. I hope that this Forum will be the prelude to Kenya's reassertion of that leadership, which Africa greatly needs.

The timing is propitious because at UNESCO we shared your country's excitement when, after the change of government, Kenya put education for all at the centre of national policy by making it free. Both UNESCO and COL have tried to help you make a success of that ambitious decision, which we fully support.

It is much better to reach bravely for universal education and address systematically the challenges that it presents, rather than to find excuses for postponing repeatedly the day when all citizens feel that their right to education is a right that they can exercise. In Kenya you have reached bravely for universal education and I understand that it has had an impact far beyond primary education as Kenyans now show greater interest in their right to education at all levels. Distance education can give powerful support to the right to education, both here in Kenya and across Africa.

I am also delighted that Kenya is the headquarters of the African Virtual University. The AVU has had a chequered history since the World Bank launched it with an inappropriate model a decade ago. However, I am encouraged by the way that it has adapted much more fully to its African environment since Peter Dzvimbo took over as Vice-Chancellor.

He comes to the AVU with a reputation as one of the world's top ODL practitioners and I am confident that he will make it work to the advantage of Africa generally and Kenya in particular. There is something nicely cyclical here. Kenya helped to get the Open University going in Zimbabwe, with a little help from the Commonwealth of Learning too, I am proud to say. Now, here is the former Vice-Chancellor of the Open University of Zimbabwe working in Kenya for the benefit of all of Africa.

All this makes it an honour to be here.

You have given me the title International Perspectives in Open Learning and Distance Education. I am very fortunate to follow the excellent presentation by Professor Karani who gave a good framework for what I am going to say.

I shall begin by recalling what open learning and distance education are. Then I shall review briefly some of the history, show why open learning and distance education are important, and identify the important trends today. This will lead me, in a third section, to take an international perspective but to draw from it conclusions for Kenya.

This is a workshop about policy making. Helping governments to develop policies on open and distance learning is COL's main programme and I argue for the importance of policy making. Policy making takes place in a context and I suggest that the context for us here is the development agenda expressed in the Millennium Development Goals and, most particularly, the agenda of Education for All set at Dakar nearly five years ago.

Open and Distance Learning: What is it?

So let me begin by looking with you at these terms open learning and distance education. Definitions are important and academics like them, so books and many articles have been written about these names. Nevertheless, I can be brief.

The term open learning describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. People can face many barriers to learning. For example, there may be age barriers. I am told that when Kenya threw open its schools one eighty-year old man put on short trousers and turned up to the school in his village saying that he had come for the education that he had never been able to have before. I learned yesterday that he is still attending school.

In too many countries there are still barriers of gender. I am not talking about formal discrimination against girls, but about the many informal barriers that explain why boys outnumber girls in school in most countries. Maybe the school is a long way away and parents don't think the walk to school is safe for their daughter. Maybe the school is not fenced, or has no toilets. Perhaps there are few female teachers to give role models for girls. An ideally open school would do away with these barriers.

In reality it is impossible for education to be open on every imaginable dimension. When people put the label 'open' on a college, school, or university they usually concentrate its meaning on an aspect of openness that will be particularly appreciated by the students.

For example, when they created the Open University in the UK in 1969 it based its claim to be open on abolishing all academic prerequisites for entry. You did not have to show any evidence of having been to school or passed any exams. Once you started you had to work hard to pass your courses and continue - but there were no barriers to starting. That open admissions policy was very radical for the UK in those days.

But the Open University was not open on some other dimensions. You could not enrol unless you were aged over 21, so there was an age barrier. You had to study at a prescribed pace, between fixed dates for starting and finishing, so there was a barrier of time. To other open institutions, such as Athabasca University in Canada, that did not have an age barrier and allowed you to start your course at the beginning of any month and take as long as you liked, the UK Open University didn't seem particularly open on the dimensions that they valued.

So, in sum, open learning is a relative term but it does express the ambition of an institution to remove

those barriers to learning that are particularly troublesome in its own environment.

Distance education is the delivery of learning or training to learners who are separated, mostly by time and space, from those who are teaching and training. Because learners and teachers are separated by time and space, some kind of technology or media must be used for communication between them.

If you live in a remote area distance education is clearly also a form of open learning, because studying is open to you in a way that it was not before. However, distance education does not necessarily have to be open on other dimensions, such as admission pre-requisites or timetables of study. I add that distance education can operate at all levels. Governments in Australia, Canada and New Zealand have been using distance education at the school level for many years. At the Commonwealth of Learning we are busily engaged in helping various countries, notably in the Pacific, to use distance education for technical and vocational education and training (TVET).

People used to joke that you wouldn't want to be operated on by a surgeon who had studied at a distance, but today much continuing medical education takes place at a distance. They used to say the same about airline pilots, but when you think about it, the flight simulators in which trainee pilots spend many hours are a form of distance learning.

In reality, although open learning and distance education are conceptually distinct, as I have just tried to show, they are clearly complementary. It's hard to get far into opening up learning without introducing some elements of distance education whereas introducing distance education inevitably opens up learning in new ways for many people.

For this reason it has become common to bring these two terms together in the expression open and distance learning or ODL, which is a bit clumsy but people know what it means. However, either because these terms don't please everyone or because people like novelty, new terms keep appearing in the general area of ODL. Three of them are eLearning, online learning, and virtual learning. All three terms used to mean - say four years ago - that the learner was connected to a computer and was learning through the computer and the networks that it was connected to.

Today people seem to be less strict about how they use these terms. They tend to use all three terms, eLearning, online learning and virtual learning, to refer to learning with a variety of media, not just computers. They have evolved to designate forms of ODL that include more than just print and paper. I see that the African Virtual University brings the terms together in a new way and talks about ODeL - Open, Distance and eLearning. Another recent term, that reflects the growing trend of mixing ODL with conventional face-to-face teaching, is flexible learning, which is, of course, a nice flexible term.

Trends and Cycles of History in ODL

Let me now attempt a brief and inadequate history of ODL. My purpose is not to give you an overview, but to draw attention to some key trends. I shall call this 'cycles of history' in ODL because there is a cyclical aspect to some of the trends.

St. Paul and the two pillars of distance education

I like to start my history of ODL with Saint Paul. His letters, or epistles, to the young churches around the Mediterranean in the first century AD, were a powerful form of distance teaching. They were also a good example of flexible learning because there were few copies of each letter so most people heard them read out when their local church assembled. Only a very few people would have had copies to read at home. If you judge by the subsequent growth of the Christian church, Saint Paul's epistles are - because they continue to be read and studied today - the most successful application of distance learning in history. Their success was founded on the two elements that continue to distinguish the most successful distance education practice today.

First, you have a carefully written text that presents and explains the subject matter. Second, you have a meeting of interested students guided by a tutor who can give further explanations of the text, answer questions and test understanding.

Today the text may not be on paper and the meeting may not take place face to face, but these two elements remain the two pillars of distance education.

You might like to reflect on the fact that despite subsequent progress, St Paul's epistles are the only distance education available to all of us in this hotel. There is a Gideon Bible in all our rooms and there are many churches in Nairobi that we could have gone to yesterday to hear exposition on his words. I should also note that St. Paul's distance education was a private initiative, not something backed by the state. Indeed, both the Roman and Jewish authorities considered what he was doing to be subversive. This too can be a feature of distance education.

Printing and posting: distance learning for individuals

The next development of distance education made it possible for individuals to learn at a distance without having to assemble in groups as the young Christian churches had done. Distance learning for the individual had to await two new technologies.

First, the technology of printing made it possible to produce many copies of a text at relatively low cost. Second, the creation of universal postal systems allowed documents to be mailed to people all over a country so that they could receive them at home.

Those who complain that education is slow to adopt new technologies might note that correspondence education began as soon as Britain introduced a universal postal system, the Penny Post, in the middle of the nineteenth century. Isaac Pitman offered a course in shorthand almost immediately and correspondence education was born. It began as a private commercial venture and correspondence education has always retained a strong commercial component, even though governments and public universities also began offering correspondence education in the 20th century.

As the name implies, correspondence education usually involved mail going in two directions: the school mailed instructional texts to the students; each student mailed back homework which would be corrected and commented on by a tutor and returned to the student. This is nicely described by the famous phrase of Borje Holmberg, the great scholar of correspondence education, who called this process a 'guided didactic conversation'. The establishment of a guided didactic conversation is another pillar of good distance education practice.

For over a century from the 19th century until the last half of the 20th century correspondence education brought great benefits to large numbers of people. It seems to me that this contribution was never properly recognised, partly because it involved individuals learning privately and partly because the correspondence schools were mostly private enterprises. This combination, private individuals dealing with private companies, was also the explanation for the abuses that gave correspondence education a bad name and caused a backlash against it in the 1960s. An article by Jessica Mitford in the Atlantic Monthly in 1970, entitled Let us now appraise Famous Authors, revealed how a well-known correspondence school was deceiving its students and providing a poor service at a high price.

Political profile and mass media: distance education at scale

Two trends came together in the 1960s to create the modern revolution that brought together open learning and distance education in an explicit manner and dramatically increased the impact and effectiveness of ODL.

First, the 1960s were a time when all governments gave high priority to expanding education at all levels. In the western world this expansion focused on expanding universities for young full-time students, leaving the challenge of how to provide for the many older people who had missed the chance of going to university when access was very limited.

Second, the 1960s were a time of effervescence and enthusiasm for communications technology. In this respect it was rather like today, except that the exciting technology of the time was television. Many people thought that television was far too important to be limited to entertainment and wanted to harness it to education as well.

These trends merged most impressively in the United Kingdom with the creation of the Open University in 1969. The Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, wanted to open up higher education to the millions who had missed it when they were younger. He thought that the mass media could provide a vehicle. As an academic, he also liked the idea of opening up university life to public view, so that even those who did not become students could take part, through television, in intellectual discussions.

The establishment and growth of the Open University is a remarkable story that I do not have time to tell here. Many people, both politicians and academics, contributed to its success. Most importantly, it was an ambitious project: ambitious in scope, ambitious in scale and ambitious in quality. These ambitions motivated the Open University's first Vice-Chancellor, Walter Perry.

He took the job because he thought that the quality of teaching in the existing universities was terrible and wanted to improve it. He determined to create a 'real' university that would conduct research as well as teaching. He decided to operate at scale, taking 25,000 students in the first intake and ignoring the cautious civil servants who advised him to do a small pilot project to see if the new distance teaching university would work.

Perry had seized on a very important principle. He realised that if much of the Open University's teaching were carried by mass media such as print, TV and radio then it could benefit from economies of scale. These media are cheap to reproduce or broadcast at scale once you have the first copy. However, the first copy, if it is produced to world-class academic and pedagogical standards, is expensive to make. Perry understood that the Open University had to operate at scale to justify the investment he intended to make in materials - but also that if he operated at scale he would be able to cut the costs of higher education substantially.

Breaking the Iron Triangle

I want to emphasise this point further. Throughout history education has been constrained by what I call the iron triangle. Our wish is to make quality education available to everyone at low cost. This is the triangle of quality, access and cost.

Unfortunately, with conventional classroom teaching, it seems that the iron triangle is a straitjacket or, at best, a zero-sum game. If you increase access by putting more people in the class people will accuse you of lowering quality. If you try to avoid that accusation you normally have to raise costs, and so on. We have become so used to accepting these constraints that we have allowed an insidious link to develop in our minds between quality and exclusivity. You can't have quality in education unless you exclude many people from it.

The revolution of ODL with mass media broke open the iron triangle. With the mass media big is beautiful. You can operate at large scale with high quality and low costs. Harnessing the mass media to higher education enabled the Open University to excel in all three dimensions and reshape the triangle.

It immediately became the largest university in Britain. When the Open University celebrated its 25th anniversary there were more students in the Open University alone, some 150,000, than there had been in all UK universities combined in the year that the creation of the university had been announced. Regarding quality, the most recent independent rankings of the quality of the teaching programmes in UK universities put the Open University in 5th place out of 100 institutions. Cost studies conducted by the UK government show that however the calculations are done, the total cost of an Open University degree is substantially less than in conventional institutions.

Interaction and independence: getting the mixture right

However, I would leave out an important part of the story if I gave you the impression that Walter Perry simply took advantage of the economies of scale of the mass media. He was motivated, you will

remember, by a desire to improve the quality of university teaching. That required people contact.

He was determined to break with the legacy of poor correspondence education that abandoned students to struggle and drop out on their own. This led the Open University to develop extensive and intensive student support services, both to help them in the academic aspects of their courses and with the new experience of being a distance learner.

The challenge is that student support is inherently more labour intensive than using the mass media to allow students to learn independently. Student support through people does not have the same potential for economies of scale. Therefore the fundamental dilemma in designing a distance learning system is to get a good balance between using the media so that students can learn independently and using tutors so that they can be well supported.

That balance has to be right in economic terms, in pedagogical terms and in terms of convenience for the student. Too much personal support, such as meetings and other timetabled events, can put constraints on students that make learning less open as well as more expensive. On the other hand too much reliance on media and independent learning can undermine the student's motivation.

ODL in the era of eLearning

I conclude my historical survey by commenting the recent trends in ODL. The most important trend is eLearning and this is too new for definitive judgements. A feature of the history of education, going right back to the invention the blackboard in 1850, is that each new technology is hailed as the harbinger of an educational revolution. It was true of radio, film, television, programmed learning and computers and it has been true most recently of online communication.

Like many other areas of human life, education was swept up in the dot.com frenzy of 1999-2000 when some prophets argued that the Internet would be the only vehicle for education in the future. Those prophesies look silly today, but it is a feature of new developments that we tend to overestimate their immediate impact and underestimate their long-term impact. Studies show that eLearning has not delivered on the extravagant claims that were made for it four years ago.

However, eLearning is gradually seeping into education at all levels and contributing to the trend to flexible education. This is reflected, as I mentioned earlier, in the slippage of the meaning of the term eLearning to mean a broader approach to ODL than pure Internet.

In terms of the trends that I have identified I make two remarks about eLearning. First, it shares some of the features of correspondence education and, like correspondence education, has attracted many private sector players. At its best it enables a much more sustained 'guided didactic conversation' than the delays of the postal service allowed. At its worst it allows fraudsters to take students' money before closing down their website as they put their profits in the bank.

Second, the Internet is not, and probably never will be, a mass medium - even if the day comes when

everyone is connected to it. Telephone is not radio, even in well-connected communities. Internet learning alone cannot have the mass impact on access that was achieved with the mass media of broadcast and print. This partly explains why the pure Internet learning operations that were launched in the enthusiasm of the dot.com frenzy have either disappeared or broadened out to take a multi-media approach.

The other reason for evolution towards multi-media, or perhaps another way of saying the same thing, is that students like variety and like changing from one learning medium to another. For most people a well-produced book is more satisfying to use as a book than as a downloaded file on their computer screen.

I began these remarks about the history of ODL by talking about cycles of history. You can see now that spiral is a more apt word than cycle. For example, Internet learning is like correspondence learning but takes place at a higher level of sophistication and power.

An International Perspective

These remarks lead nicely into my comments on ODL from an international perspective. In this era of globalisation you might not expect a technology-based endeavour like ODL to be very different from country to country. That there are actually considerable national differences owes more to political and economic environments than to technology.

Not surprisingly, ODL is most successful and most vibrant in countries with pressing educational needs and governments that are committed to deploying ODL to meet some of those needs. As I noted earlier, this was the case for the UK in 1960s and 1970s. The country wanted to expand higher education and political parties from both ends of the political spectrum built up the Open University as a way to do it.

Today India is the undoubted world leader in ODL, not only by the volume of its activity but also its diversity. 20% of students in Indian higher education are in the national and state open universities with 10% of them, or one million students, in the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) alone. Government policy is to raise that 20% figure to 40%.

India is also ahead of other countries in using ODL at secondary level, with 300,000 pupils in its National Institute of Open Schooling. Furthermore India is effervescing with technology-based initiatives, such as the Maharashtra Knowledge Corporation Ltd, and with projects linked directly to the development agenda, such as the Virtual Academy for the Semi-Arid Tropics.

India owes its leadership to clear government policy and a number of highly able and innovative institutional leaders who have a remarkable talent for integrating the newest developments in working and teaching methods into each new initiative. Clear government policy is particularly important because it allows public goods, such as national satellites, to be used for education. Thus IGNOU is extending its scope by operating a number of satellite TV channels.

In other countries it is interesting to note how government policy has evolved to give greater importance to ODL. Korea and Indonesia, for example, created open universities in the 1980s but saw them more as a

safety valve in the higher education system than as real universities. More recently both countries have given much greater importance these institutions, linking them explicitly with national policies for ICTs and connectivity.

In all countries conventional educational institutions, most notably at university level, are adding ODL activities to their face-to-face teaching and becoming 'dual-mode' institutions. Making this combination work effectively - and cost-effectively - is not straightforward. Experience shows, once again, that strong institutional leadership and willpower is essential to make dual-mode institutions work well.

However, in rich countries where conventional face-to-face teaching institutions have a strong local political base, it can be sometimes be difficult for small single-mode ODL institutions to gather the necessary political support unless they establish an unchallengeable track record of impact and effectiveness.

In Canada, for example, decisions have been taken recently to merge the single-mode ODL institutions in Québec and British Columbia, the Télé-université and the Open University of British Columbia, with conventional institutions. Whether this will prove a more successful way of creating a dual-mode institution than growing the ODL component within a conventional institution from scratch only time will tell.

Conclusions for Kenya

I hope that these brief comments about the history of open and distance learning and its profile around the world will provide a useful backdrop for Kenya's National Consultative Policy Forum, which COL is proud to support. I end with four concluding remarks.

First, all the evidence that I have outlined shows that a country with a clear policy for the development of ODL will achieve greater impact and better service for its people than a country that leaves it up to ad hoc individual and institutional initiatives to determine the role of ODL in the education system. The holding of this Forum is therefore a promising step. The Commonwealth of Learning is proud to have supported Kenyan educators to attend various workshops and meetings on ODL in recent times so you have a good reservoir of Kenyan talent to draw on.

Second, Kenya as a country is an almost perfect candidate for ODL. By 2015, when the effects of your education-for-all policy will be fully felt, you will have a population of 40 million people. That means you can operate distance education at scale at tertiary and secondary levels. I advise you to focus on forms of ODL that exploit the advantages of the mass media while at the same time beginning the steady development of supportive electronic networks. India can be a good example to inspire you.

Third, I urge you to put in place a strong national framework to support your ODL developments, most especially a national quality assurance framework. Kenya is only just beginning to shed its reputation for corruption and it is absolutely important that the student assessment systems at all levels of ODL provision be seen to have complete integrity and independence from political tampering or bribery.

Fourth, be ambitious. Those who built today's most successful ODL systems wanted to change the world, and they did so. Kenya has asserted its educational ambitions by making primary education free and open. It can now use ODL to open up education and training at all levels and to provide a model for the whole of Africa.

I end by assuring you that the Commonwealth of Learning is eager to accompany you on your journey to the development of policy and practice. We think that education in Kenya is at an important crossroads. We want to see you take the best road and progress resolutely along it for the benefit of all Kenyans.