Distance Education under Threat: an Opportunity for Africa?

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Abstract

These are confusing times for distance education. On the one hand it has never been so popular. Increasing numbers of students are choosing this mode of study and few tertiary institutions do not now offer some programmes by this means. But on the other hand it appears to be under threat as never before. While few countries have followed Ethiopia in banning distance learning outright, the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) is investigating a rising tide of restrictive legislation and practices. How should legitimate distance education providers react to this seeming contradiction?

Introduction

Colleagues, it is a pleasure to be here and I thank Juma for the invitation.

I have come here directly from a ceremony, in the presence of Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal, Princess Anne, to celebrate the establishment of Africa’s newest university, the University of Seychelles, which took place on Monday.

UniSey, as they call it, is using partnerships and new approaches to create a good university for a population of only 80,000 people. Their inventiveness should inspire us all.

The Commonwealth of Learning was pleased to sign an agreement to continue the collaboration with Seychelles that has already been so productive in the case of the Virtual University of Small States of the
Commonwealth. In 2000 the Education Minister of Seychelles, Danny Faure, was a driving force behind the creation of the VUSSC. Ten years later it is really starting to deliver, which shows that good developments in higher education take time.

Today universities – and I shall mention particularly universities that teach at a distance – face new opportunities and new threats. The opportunities are the continually rising demand for higher education and the ceaseless advance of information and communications technology.

All universities face the threat of funding cuts in this age of austerity, while distance teaching universities face the threat of a new wave of hostility to their values and methods. It is about those last threats that I shall speak today and my title is Distance Education under Threat: an Opportunity for Africa?

There has always been hostility to the methods of distance education. Education is a conservative area of human activity and many people, both in universities and among the wider public, do not regard education as legitimate unless a live teacher faces a live class.

More insidious is the opposition to two of the values implicit in open and distance learning. The first contested value is openness to people. Many still consider that quality in education is synonymous with exclusivity. They define the quality of their institution by the numbers of people they exclude from it. To such a mindset the notion of an open university, that measures its success by the number and variety of people that it includes, is deeply threatening.

The second contested value is openness to ideas. It is generally true that open and distance learning encourages people to think for themselves. They reach their own conclusions about an issue after studying course materials that present a variety of perspectives. The independent thinking that derives naturally from independent study is threatening to those who would limit debate and constrain thought. They consider face-to-face instruction less risky.

The paradox that I shall explore today is strange but simple. Globally, open and distance learning has grown by leaps and bounds since the creation of the first open universities forty years ago. Most importantly, this growth is not only, indeed not mainly, through the multiplication and growth of open universities.

The number of mega-universities with over 100,000 enrolled students has indeed grown steadily since I wrote the book, Mega-universities, in 1996. But even more dramatic has been the growth of distance learning programmes within conventional campus universities.

Indeed, it is a fair generalisation that, except in those countries where governments control the offering of distance education, there are now very few universities which do not offer some programmes at a distance – or at least, if they want to avoid the ‘d’ word, through forms of blended learning. It has now become impossible to calculate how many of the world’s students are learning at a distance, but they number in the tens of millions.

The paradox is that at the moment when open and distance education seems to have found its place in the sun by being adopted throughout higher education, opposition to it is emerging all over the globe.
That is the reason for the first part of my title, *Distance Education under Threat*. But in the second part of my title I want to suggest that we should see this as an opportunity – not just to reassert the importance of our values and the effectiveness of our methods, but also to clean house. We must accept that the opposition to ODL is not solely an expression of bad will or fear of change. Some hostility is a reaction to abuses, which we must address.

Let me reassure you that the opposition we face, although determined, vicious and multi-pronged, will not prevail. As evidence I cite the conclusions of last year’s UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education.

The conference title was *The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development* and it brought together over a thousand governmental and institutional delegates from most countries of the world.

What are these new dynamics? They were identified and unpacked in the conference communique that the delegates approved (UNESCO, 2009). Since then they have been articulated by the very active Executive-Secretary of the Conference, UNESCO’s Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, in various presentations (e.g. Uvalić-Trumbić, 2010a). Stamenka is here with us to share her wisdom again today.

The new dynamics are:

1. Rising demand and massification
2. Diversification of providers and methods
3. Private provision
4. Distance education
5. Cross-border higher education
6. Quality assurance
7. Teacher education
8. Challenges to the academic profession

The striking feature about this list is that all these new dynamics relate more or less directly to open and distance learning or ODL.

Take the first, rising demand and massification. Today there is a revolution in higher education as countries use the technology of distance education to achieve something completely new: education of higher quality at lower cost. I am referring to education that can be scaled up to achieve even lower costs without loss of quality – an important response to massification.
Take the last ‘new dynamic’ on the list, challenges to the academic profession. All over the world, in open and campus institutions, academics are learning new skills and adapting to new realities as they offer courses in open, distance and technology-mediated formats.

So my first message today is that the current wave of opposition to ODL will not prevail against it. Open, distance and technology-mediated education is now intimately bound up with the future of higher education generally. The clock will not be turned back.

The knowledge that ODL will win the battle should give us the confidence us to see today’s threats as an opportunity to do more and better tomorrow. Let us analyse the nature of the current opposition and what we should do about it.

We are indebted to the International Council for Open and Distance Education, whose President, Frits Pannekoek, and Secretary General, Carl Holmberg, are taking this matter seriously by commissioning a study on Regulatory Frameworks on Open and Distance Education. It is too early for me to benefit from the results of that work but I am indebted to Frits Pannekoek for sharing some of his thinking with me. Let’s list some of the ways in which ODL is under attack.

**Anti-ODL policies: a summary**

**Ethiopia**

I start with the most surprising case: Ethiopia. In a directive that came without warning on August 26 this year the Ministry of Education scrapped all distance education programmes provided by both private and public institutions in the country, claiming that ‘distance learning education is unnecessary at this stage in the development of the

I was particularly surprised by this announcement because in the 1990s the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, and most of his cabinet studied successfully for the UK Open University’s MBA. As the then Vice-Chancellor of the UKOU I went to Addis Ababa to award their degrees to this remarkable group. A particularly remarkable feature was that Zenawi himself gained a distinction in every course in programme. I doubt that Meles Zenawi’s performance in the OU MBA programme has ever been equalled.

Naturally, these leaders good experience of ODL initiated a period when ODL was highly regarded and encouraged by the Ethiopian government - hence my surprise at the ban. I cannot speak with authority on the reasons for it.

Whatever the motivation, this government action impacted on 64 private institutions enrolling 75,000 students, which represented an expansion of the system from a gross higher education enrolment ratio of 1% a decade ago to a (still pitiful) 5% now. No doubt this rapid expansion of private sector distance education has led to some quality abuses, but the answer is an effective quality assurance regime, not throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

I am pleased to say that the story has a happy ending, because in October, after negotiations with the 64 institutions and their introduction of a quality assurance system, the ban was lifted.
China
It might seem odd to list China, which has millions of students in its network of TV Universities and a vibrant distance education research community, as being hostile to ODL. But by preventing the TVUs from offering four-year degrees China effectively condemns them to an educational ghetto of low prestige no matter how high the quality of their work.

India
India has a long history of ODL, starting with demonstrably low quality offerings by the correspondence programmes of conventional universities 40 years ago. Offered on a large scale, these shoddy programmes generated considerable income that was siphoned off to subsidise campus programmes rather than being used to improve the ODL courses.

The creation of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and a network of state open universities was intended to change this, but has only partially succeeded. The main reason is that the Distance Education Council, which was meant to ensure that quality assurance of ODL offerings in all institutions, was placed within the IGNOU structure. This creates a conflict of interest which prevents any credible quality assurance of ODL in either the private or the public sectors.

In another move that threatens to throw the baby out with the bathwater, the very active Indian Minister for Human Resource Development has recently proposed that no new university can offer ODL for five years. As in Ethiopia, setting up a serious quality assurance mechanism would seem to be a better solution.

United States
The United States has created a problem for itself by giving state subsidised loans to people studying with for-profit ODL institutions, subsidies that these institutions now spend millions of dollars lobbying to protect. This system has, inevitably, given rise to serious abuse. Instead of addressing the abuses, however, the US media is in a hue and cry about the quality of distance learning. Media elsewhere pick up on US trends, so this may infect other countries.

Another aspect of US policy, blatantly protectionist, is to refuse these state loans to US citizens studying with foreign ODL providers.

Other barriers
Alongside these specific national anti-ODL policies are a number of more widespread policies hostile to ODL and its values.

Recognition of qualifications
One example is policies that ban the employment in government of people who have obtained their qualifications by ODL. This will prove unsustainable since, with most universities operating in dual mode, increasing numbers of students will have some distance learning courses in their transcripts.

Sensible institutions stopped distinguishing the mode of study long ago, not least because doing so implied that some of their offerings were of lower quality than others. Yet some want to bring this
distinction back. Proposed legislation in Ecuador has a clause: ‘(Academic diplomas and degrees) should make mention of the modality in which the studies were completed…’

Specifying the blend
Another tortuous policy requires institutions or governments to specify how much of an ODL course must be offered in face-to-face mode to make it legitimate. Brazil says 80%, Malaysia says 20%. This approach will also prove unsustainable. First, asking how much of a course consists of face-to-face instruction is like asking the length of a piece of string. Second, as students take advantage of technology to learn at any time in any place, institutions will be tempted to make false declarations about how students are really spending their time.

Already we see conventional institutions claiming that a particular course was offered as ‘blended learning’ – or even in purely classroom mode – when the students taking it tell us that it was offered almost purely at a distance.

Most quality ODL programmes make provision for some face-to-face interaction, but to be faithful to the ODL values of openness and choice, attending such sessions should be optional.

The Opportunity

That is a brief summary of ways in which ODL is under threat. Where is the opportunity? Circumstances require that we act on four fronts.

Most governments still wish to increase participation in higher education but, not least because of the current economic climate, they have less money to spend on it. Expanding ODL must be a major part of the solution to the dilemma.

In a nice irony, even the World Bank, long a sceptic about ODL was advising Ethiopia to expand ODL and private institutions in order to increase participation rates. Many governments have got the message and currently a number of new open universities being created across Africa. This is a time when ODL can get the ear of government as never before.

We must make two other points while we have the ear of government. First, there is much talk nowadays about the 21st century skills that we want our graduates to have. One important skill is to be a self-directed learner. ODL and independent study is more likely to cultivate self directed learning than being spoon fed in a classroom.

The other point for government is that ODL is an effective mechanism for making the use of ICTs effective in higher education. Letting a thousand flowers bloom is nice, but governments need to be reminded that ODL institutions have the muscle to innovate cost-effectively at scale. It is not an accident that the UK Open University’s materials are among the most frequently downloaded from iTunesU.

But fourth and finally, we must clean up our act and remove the bad apples from of the barrel. One of the new dynamics of higher education is the internationalisation of quality assurance, as emphasised in another presentation by Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić (2010b).
We should campaign for our countries to maintain strong and independent quality assurance agencies that have all higher education under their purview, public and private, classroom and distance. What matters is the quality of the output of higher education, not how it was offered or under what corporate structure.

One area where there is already good international collaboration is the fight against degree mills (CHEA & UNESCO, 2009). We know what needs to be done to discourage degree mills – let’s do it. And let us encourage our governments to participate actively in UNESCO’s portal of recognised higher education institutions, so that students around the world can avoid being hoodwinked by scams and crooks.

**Conclusion**

There is much more to say but I shall finish there. It was to be expected that as distance education become more widespread and more successful it would attract more hostility. We must not give in to these threats.

Open and distance learning will prevail. However, we must seize this opportunity to show governments how ODL can help expand higher education, can lead students to acquire 21st century skills, and can be an example for the effective use of ICTs. But we must also put our own house in order by cleaning out the bad apples and supporting rigorous quality assurance mechanisms.

**References**


Uvalić-Trumbić, Stamenka (2010a) *New Dynamics of Higher Education; New Dynamics of Distance Education*, presented at the 50th Anniversary Conference at Shanghai TV University, 21 May http://www.col.org/resources/speeches/2010presentation/Pages/2010-05-21b.aspx