



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

**UNIVERSIDADE EDUARDO MONDLANE**  
**LAUNCH OF THE FIRST DISTANCE COURSE, BACHELOR IN BUSINESS**  
**MANAGEMENT**

*The History of Distance Education<sup>1</sup>*

Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen

If we intend looking at the history of Distance Education, we need first to define the concept “Distance” and see what it is that makes it so different and unique from the more traditional notions of education. You will be aware that there are numerous definitions of “distance education” that have emanated from the various stages of its evolution and over the course of its development; in fact far too numerous to mention here. But even a cursory analysis of the phenomenon will reveal that all definitions are consistent in their assertion of one main characteristic of distance education, and that is that teacher and learner are separate. For our purposes today, Keegan (1995:7) offers one of the most modern and generic definitions (which we can perhaps adopt as a starting point for this lecture) when he asserts that distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of travelling to a “fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Inaugural lecture entitled *The History of Distance Education* delivered by Professor N Barney Pityana, Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of South Africa, on the occasion of the launch of the distance course in Bachelor of Business Management, at the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, Maputo.

<sup>2</sup> Keegan, D (1995) *Distance Education technology for the new millennium: compressed video teaching*. ZIFF Papiere. Hagen. Germany: Institute for Research in Distance Education.

Some would assert that distance education has been in existence for about 100 years and that it started in Europe via correspondence courses<sup>3</sup>. If you are a purist however, you might want to argue that distance education actually began about 2000 years ago when the apostle Paul sent his “students” teachings in the form of his various letters to the new Christian churches in Asia Minor and the Mediterranean. Be that as it may, in our modern world it has been noted that distance education can be recorded back as early as 1728 when an advertisement in the Boston Gazette named Caleb Phillips, teacher of the new method of Short Hand as “seeking students for lessons to be sent weekly”,<sup>4</sup> and we also know that one Isaac Pitman taught shorthand via correspondence in Great Britain, in the 1840s.<sup>5</sup>

We know then, that distance education has been around for a very long time, and that over the years it has assumed and applied different forms and means to bridge the gap between the learner and the teacher. What is interesting, and what perhaps makes distance education so enduring, is its flexibility; it is a mode of delivery that constantly reinvents itself and is able to be adapted to the peculiar circumstance of the institution or country that adopts the model. We also know for instance that despite the giant strides that have been made in technology, correspondence systems, which originated at the end of the 19th Century, are still the most widely used in less developed societies, and yet here today, in what we are painfully aware, is regarded as a less developed society, you are launching an innovative distance course in Business Management, using a web platform. This reinforces the notion that distance learning is indeed flexible and that its application is constrained only by self limiting-mindsets and perhaps even a reluctance to move out of our comfort zones into new territory.

I am very proud of the fact that my Institution, The University of South Africa, is not only the largest Open and Distance Learning institution on the continent, but that it is was also a pioneer in the field of distance learning. While we know that London University was the first University to offer degrees via distance learning when it established its External Programme in 1858<sup>6</sup>, it was the University of South Africa, that was the first dedicated distance education institution in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Valentine, D. Distance learning: Promises, Problems and Possibilities. <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/fall53/valentine53.html>

<sup>4</sup> Holmberg, B (2005) *The evolution, principles and practices of distance education*. Bibliotheks-und informationssysteme der Universitat Oldenburg, P13

<sup>5</sup> Moore, M G .; Kearsley, G (2005) *Distance Education: A Systems view*. Second, Belmont, CA. Wadsworth. ISBN 0-534-50688-7 pp 33 – 36.

<sup>6</sup> Key facts. University of London External Programme Website. [http://www.londonexternal.ac.uk/about\\_us/facts.html](http://www.londonexternal.ac.uk/about_us/facts.html)

Unisa was founded back in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope. In 1877 it received a Royal Charter from Queen Victoria and until 1917 the University served as an examining body for Victoria College in Stellenbosch and the University of Cape Town. Act no 12 of 1916 decreed that the University of the Cape of Good hope was to be incorporated in a federal University of South Africa on 2 April 1918. In this same year the University moved from Cape Town to Pretoria. Yet, even before the disappearance of the University of the Cape of Good Hope, tutorial classes and correspondence colleges had been founded in South Africa to cater for the needs of students examined by the University.

By 1944, a new vision of the institution as a teaching university was beginning to emerge and in 1946 Professor AJH van der Walt was asked to investigate the possibility of devising a system of postal or correspondence tuition for non-residential students. By 1945 there were in fact more than twenty businesses teaching the private students. On 15 February 1946, the Division of External Studies was established, and the Higher Education Amendment Act, 1946 enabled the University to undertake the tuition and guidance of the candidates for its examinations. Thus in 1946, the University of South Africa became the first public university in the world, to teach exclusively by means of distance education. Unisa thus became the pioneer of tertiary distance education in the Western world. For the next five decades or so UNISA steadily built up an international reputation as an affordable, credible, accessible and flexible distance education institution.

After 1994, UNISA began a period of internal transformation, in step with South Africa's transition to democracy. Some of the important milestones in this process included: the inauguration in 2001 of UNISA's first black Chancellor, Justice President Bernard Ngoepe, Judge President of the Transvaal Division of the High Court of South Africa; the appointment, also in 2001, of myself, Professor Barney Pityana as UNISA's Principal and Vice Chancellor; and the renaming of UNISA's buildings to reflect the advent of democracy.

I will return to Unisa's development into an ODL institution shortly, but for the sake of comparison, I will just mention that the UK Open University, which was born in the early 1960's, also as a distance education provider, currently has approximately 200 000 students. Its growth and successes have brought it much acclaim and it is one of the 10 mega universities in the world. It must be remembered that at the time that the UKOU was

growing and flourishing, South Africa was embroiled in the struggle against apartheid and in the concomitant sanctions, and so Unisa's profile remained relatively obscure and subdued until the advent of democracy. It must also be mentioned that throughout the years of apartheid Unisa continued to accept black students, even though they were obliged to attend separate graduation ceremonies. I think the point to be made is that despite these challenges Unisa not only prevailed, but then went through an extremely complex post democracy merger to emerge today as a vibrant institution with in excess of 265 000 students - also one of the 10 mega institutions in the world.

If we look more holistically at the development, or evolution of distance education world wide, we will be able to discern four main phases. A closer examination will reveal that each of these phases has coincided more or less, with the evolutionary development of technology at that time. Each phase has been informed by, and derived its organisational form from, the predominant mode of communication at that time. This phenomenon continues even today and speaks to two other fundamental characteristics of distance education, that is, its inherent link to, and dependence on, technology, and its evolutionary nature.

On that note, 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.

- **Phase 1:** We know then, that "Correspondence systems originated at the end of the nineteenth Century, and are still the most widely used form of distance education in less developed countries. Based around a study guide in printed text and often accompanied by audio and video components such as records and slides, interaction in the correspondence method is by letters and other written or printed documents sent through postal systems
- **Phase 2:** Educational television and radio systems use various delivery technologies – terrestrial, satellite, and cable television and radio – to deliver live or recorded lectures to both individual home-based learners and groups of learners in remote classrooms where some face-to-face support might be provided. Some systems offered limited audio or video-conferencing links back to the lecturer or a moderator at a central point.

- **Phase 3:** Multimedia systems encompass text, audio, video, and computer-based materials, and usually some face-to-face- learner support delivered to both individuals and groups. In this approach, which is that used by the open universities, instruction is no longer the individual's work, but the work of teams of specialists, - media specialists, information specialists, instructional design specialists, and learning specialists. Programmes are prepared for distribution over a large number of learners, usually located across a whole country.
- **Phase 4:** Internet- based systems in which multi-media (text, audio, video and computer-based) materials in electronic format are delivered to individuals through computers, along with access to databases and electronic libraries, and which enable teacher-student and student-student, one-to-one, one-to-many interactions, synchronously or asynchronously, through e-mail, computer conferences, bulletin boards, etc.”<sup>7</sup>

In his paper entitled “Fifth Generation Distance Education” Professor Jim Taylor of the University of Southern Queensland makes mention of a 5th generation ODL Model which is based on the 4th generation mentioned above, but which aims to capitalise on the features of the internet and the web. It is clear then that ODL is an evolving mode of delivery, driven by the dual imperatives of emerging technologies and increased access. It would seem that in terms of these phases, or generations, for the purposes of the course that is being launched here today, you have edged into the 5th generation.

It might be more pertinent for us as African scholars though, to look at the development of distance education in Africa. I believe it will provide some interesting insights.

### **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 10<sup>th</sup> Year of South Africa's

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pgs 23,24

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.

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<sup>8</sup> Asmal: All-African Minister's conference on open learning and distance education (02/02/2004)  
[http://polity.org.za/article.php?a\\_id+46293](http://polity.org.za/article.php?a_id+46293)

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 provides 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 in 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, as well as consultations 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. It was agreed that this matter would be further developed at the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

**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 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Second Conference of African Ministers of Education (COMEDAF II) Algiers, April 10-11, 2005)  
stCom05/1/13.2

<sup>10</sup> 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.

An examination of the programme of the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 our 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

When it comes to Africa, there is some tension between the traditional “western” understanding of the various generations of ODL, and their practical implementation in the African context. Given the fact that most of the modes have originated in western countries in response to the technology advances that have been made in those same countries, it stands to reason that African countries, the majority of whom already have severe and critical higher education obstacles to overcome, will not be in a position financially, technologically or infrastructurally, to keep abreast of changing delivery modes. Furthermore, given the diversity of the student population, their varying levels of computer literacy, language literacy and financial wherewithal, it is most unlikely that any given mode or generation of ODL will offer African distance education institutions a suitable “fit”.

What is likely, is that if African ODL institutions hope to service all of their students according to their needs, they will have to use a selection from the spectrum of the modes, from pure paper-based delivery through to high tech online delivery, gradually working towards the most technological efficient mode that they can support. This brings with it an entire range of complications, particularly as regards infrastructure, systems and process alignment, methods of assessments and so on. It would seem that that if Africa is to bridge the educational divide by means of ODL, it will have to have to the confidence and innovation to create an “indigenous” ODL model that takes into account the size and shape of

the students who seek access, as well as the socio economic conditions which bind them. Until that happens, African ODL institutions are likely to vacillate between the various delivery modes, without ever achieving a suitable “fit”, and this will continue to impact upon institutional efficiency, service delivery, learner support and throughput rates.

In the words of Badat :

To be a free people is to have the courage to be the authors of our own destiny, to be pioneers rather than just imitators, to push to the limits the bounds of possibility, and to take responsibility for making decisions and choices.....Ultimately, however, we must develop our own thinking and ideas, devise our own approaches...<sup>11</sup>

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, thus 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, and 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.

If one traces and analyses 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

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<sup>11</sup> Badat, S (2004) *Quality Assurance, Higher Education and Social Transformation: The Governance of Quality and the Quality of Governance of Quality*. Address to the First Biennial Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM) International Quality Assurance Conference. 23 – 25 June 2004 South Africa, Johannesburg. Pg 21

and despite the various constraints and challenges that are so depressingly familiar to all of us.

**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 be done to achieve our educational goals in Africa.

Distance education is here to stay, there can be no doubt about that. I would suggest that the responsibility for its success or failure rests squarely on our shoulders. I would suggest further, that it is a dual responsibility: of the teachers and the learners. Just as it is incumbent upon higher education institutions in Africa to provide opportunities for their students to grow and develop, it is equally incumbent upon those students to seize the opportunities that are offered to them and to apply themselves in the broadest sense of the word, to being the type of scholars and graduates who will bring honour to themselves, their families and their countries. That type of application takes discipline and perseverance.

I would like to congratulate Universidade Eduardo Mondlane on this exciting initiative. I wish them well with their course in Business Management and I look forward to hearing of success and progress.

Thank you