The Sixth African Council for Distance Education Triennial Conference

Report

Theme: *Open and Distance Learning amidst COVID-19: The Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)*

27th - 29th September
2021

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Preamble

The African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) is a continental educational organization comprising African universities and other higher education institutions, committed to expanding access to quality education and training through Open and Distance Learning (ODL), including e-learning. It is a unifying body of distance education providers and practitioners in Africa. The mandate of the ACDE, as a unifying body of ODL providers in Africa, is primarily to promote collaboration, policy, research and quality assurance in open and distance learning to increase access to quality education and training in Africa.

Every three years, the ACDE organizes its General Assembly and Conference to take stock of its activities in the last three years and to plan for the next three years (http://acde-afri.org/). In 2021, the 6th ACDE Triennial conference was held virtually from Accra Ghana on 28th and 29th September, with a pre-conference workshop on Quality assurance held on 27th September 2021. The conference was hosted by Laweh Open University College, in partnership with the Association of African Universities (AAU), All-Africa Students Union (AASU), Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC), Ministry of Education, Ghana and the International Council for Open & Distance Education (ICDE). The conference was presided over by the honour of His Excellency Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, under whose leadership the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), was resuscitated in 2002.

In line with the aspirations of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), ACDE has embarked on a number of initiatives geared at ensuring that, the strengths of ODL is harnessed towards the achievement of both the strategic focus of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA, 2016-2025) and ultimately the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. This focus necessitated a stakeholders' conference to review and share experiences on the progress made by diverse stakeholders in the Open and Distance Education space in Africa and beyond, to fulfil the goals of the CESA and SDG4. The theme for the conference was: *"Open and Distance Learning amidst COVID-19: The Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)".*

The two days' conference and pre-conference workshop deliberated on the following subthemes:
1. Infrastructure, ODL resources and adoption of techniques for open and distance education
2. Quality assurance in open and distance learning
3. Teaching and learning methodologies in open and distance learning
4. Academic misconduct in open and distance education
5. Students' and other stakeholders' perceptions of open and distant learning

The conference brought together over 170 participants virtually via Zoom plus over 600 participants who were following the conference proceedings on YouTube and Facebook. On the other hand, the pre-conference attracted 41 participants who participated virtually. Participants for

the pre-conference and conference were drawn from Government Policymakers, Vice-Chancellors, Rectors, Presidents and other high level leaders of higher education institutions, scholars, students, education professionals, development agencies, education technology investors, and private sector committed to sustainable open and distance learning in the continent and in the diaspora.

As part of the highlights of the conference, personalities and institutions who have made outstanding contributions to open and distance learning in Africa were recognized and presented with special awards namely: ACDE Strategic Leadership Award; ACDE Distinguished Service Award; ACDE Legacy Service Award; and ACDE Outstanding Institution Award.

Pre-conference workshop 27th September 2021
The pre-conference workshop was opened by the ACDE President, Professor Goski Alabi and facilitated by two Quality Assurance (QA) experts. The workshop was historic in that it was focusing on the QA Toolkit that was developed by the ACDE in collaboration with Commonwealth of Learning (COL). The ACDE-QA Toolkit was developed and validated for use in Africa, and it provides an appropriate framework for ODL provision in the continent.

Assuring quality in ODL systems in the continent is critical since it has become the mode of education provision occasioned by COVID-19 pandemic. The onset of the pandemic forced almost all institutions to start offering some form of virtual learning. This development has led to the pervasiveness of various forms of blended learning in the African institutions, which has now become the 'new normal'. All institutions therefore need to take the quality of virtual learning seriously. In this regard, the ACDE-QA Toolkit becomes very useful. However, for institutions to use the resource effectively, there is need to provide guidance on how it can be used. This is particularly important given the plans of the ACDE Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (QAAA) to introduce a programme that seeks to accredit and certificate institutions in Africa. On this programme, the ACDE will only accredit institutions that are officially recognized by their national regulatory body in their home countries.

ACDE recognizes the need to train certified experts who will conduct external assessments. The certification of institutions will have two components, institutional self-assessment report and external assessment where a minimum of three experts will visit an institution to assess and compile an external evaluation report. For this process to flow smoothly and yield desired results, capacity building is critical. The ACDE is committed to ensuring national and institutional capacity building. It is in light of these quality enhancement plans at continental level that the workshop was organized. Given the expertise and experience of the two facilitators identified for the workshop, participants were equipped with enough knowledge and skills to use the Toolkit. Thus, institutions are encouraged to consider adopting or adapting the Toolkit as a framework for quality assurance as the Toolkit will go a long way in enhancing harmonization of quality assurance in Africa.

The complex nature of quality as applied in higher education, requires striking a common understanding of the term at institutional level. The aspect of quality higher education was teased out, with a view to getting participants to appreciate that universities should be responsive enough to the needs and demands of the society and of the job market and in the process, also observe quality. Key trends in higher education identified include:

- Hybrid teaching – facilitated by increased use of technology
- The threat of internationalization as a business model for universities
- Prioritizing Skills over knowledge
- The potential devalued university degree
- The expansion of OER
- Micro credentialing as an option for more business opportunities for Higher Education.

Given the new demands in society, universities need to rethink what quality higher education means and how best it should be assured.

Conference 28th and 29th September 2021
The two days' conference as highlighted in this report was characterised by: plenary conference opening and presentations, keynote address and breakout sessions comprising paper presentations under three sub-themes.

Plenary Sessions
The plenary sessions were characterised by opening and welcoming remarks, remarks from partner organisations, keynote addresses as well as official conference opening address by the chief guest. The key issues arising from the plenary sessions include:

1. COVID- 19 has made distance learning almost an indispensable component of the educational provision. The state of research and higher education on the Continent of Africa has been a cause for concern even before the COVID-19 crisis, and the virus has exacerbated these vulnerabilities. Academics and research institutions find themselves tasked with learning to adapt in real-time, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic that significantly disrupted the global education sector.
2. Steps must be taken to ensure that quality assurance is observed in implementing open and distance learning. Every actor in ODEL is urged to maintain quality in ODeL to change the narrative and perception that ODL is not of high quality.
3. ACDE reaffirms its vision to be the leading voice for the promotion and advocacy of open and distance learning in Africa, and seeks to entrench its mission through promoting collaboration, research and quality assurance of ODL, to enhance access to inclusive quality education and training in Africa, in line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 and with the CESA. There is need to work with policymakers to address the perceived and actual challenges of ODL, particularly the quality issues by strengthening quality practices

and re-positioning of Open and Distance Learning. There is need for ACDE to use the ACDE Quality Assurance Toolkit to establish a certification and accreditation programme under the leadership of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), and in collaboration with the Nigerian Universities Commission and the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC).

4. The biggest lesson to be learned after the pandemic is that education is going digital, hence there is no restriction on education. UNESCO IITE is working with higher institutions of learning and open universities for which ACDE is a partner to open up the education space. TVET projects which focuses on training and capacity building of teachers, inclusion of people with disabilities, as well as establishment of a Global e-library for teachers is critical.

5. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, COL has been providing guidelines and policy briefs on building the capacities of teachers for online teaching, skilling and re-skilling the youth for livelihoods, and developing technology issues that can reach the last mile. Closure of campuses affected more than 250 million students worldwide. This brought about the global acceptance and appreciation of distance and online learning which years of advocacy could not achieve.

6. The concept of open and distance learning has brought a shift in the way education is delivered in current times. It has propelled the building of equitable systems of knowledge sharing. It has made education inclusive and equitable for all. There is need to build infrastructure to support ODeL, plan innovative ways to deliver ODeL while looking at emerging technologies, and how to incorporate them into existing systems. Additionally, there is need to make ODeL more inviting by ensuring that quality is infused into its content preparation.

7. The Advent on the 4th Industrial Revolution focuses on four objectives mainly, Mechanization, Water Power, steam power, Mass production, assembly line, electricity, Computer and automation, and Cyber-Physical Systems.

8. The system of Brick and Mortar classrooms limits numbers and increase expenditure and investment in Educational facilities. Hence Investment should be pushed into e-learning and Technology since the future seems to be geared towards that direction.

9. The revelation of the pandemic on the African continent is the unpreparedness of many Universities in Africa to be able to keep the use of technologies for their teaching and research activities.

10. Some of the challenges ODL include; ICT illiteracy among some adult learners, poor network coverage in rural areas, high cost of bandwidth, high cost of hardware, unreliable or non-availability of power supply, inadequate local content, and unpreparedness for a mode of delivery shift, among both staff and students because they are not familiar with teaching and learning online. The biggest challenge is perception and acceptability of the online education model as well as the issue of quality.

11. There is need for the massification of higher education in Africa as the rate of students registered in higher education is still below 10% of those starting school in Sub-Saharan Africa. Online lectures are richer with multi-media presentations that include notes, PowerPoint presentations, video, audio clips, interactive discussion forums, chat-boards, and so on. This enables students to listen to lectures at their own time.

12. The COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed the face of the education sector and the challenges will need to be addressed. The ODL model of educational delivery has evolved into the use of interactive self-learning content facilitated by technology. Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of distance education has become more important than ever before.

13. Some issues to be addressed by governments and institutions include: the need to invest in building the capacity of staff for the new context; (re) design of content and equitable solutions in the design of assessments for online environments; quality assurance; and eLearning policies. Some emerging initiatives such as collaboration for building capacity on the continent, the potential contributions of telecommunication multinationals, strengthening energy mix solutions to resolve power supply issues, and the relevance of educational provisions for the future of work. The alignment of the ACDE strategic initiatives with CESA initiatives of the African Union, and the SDG 4 of the United Nations is particularly important in light of the impact of the pandemic on the education sector. The existence of ACDE could not have been better, at such a time when the mainstreaming of ODeL has been accelerated by the shift to online learning arising from the impact of the pandemic on education.

14. Investing more in eLearning and machine learning is necessary because it holds a promising future for Africa if technology is used appropriately. There is need to put in place required technological infrastructure and train faculty members to use it effectively.

Breakaway Sessions Presentations
The breakaway sessions were organised around three thematic areas for day one and two namely: Academic misconduct, and teaching and learning methodologies in ODeL; Open and distance learning quality assurance, infrastructure and resources; and Students and stakeholders perceptions of open and distance learning. A total of twenty papers were presented in the breakaway sessions. The key issues arising from the papers under each sub theme were as follows:

Academic Misconduct, and Teaching and Learning Methodologies in ODeL
1. The magnitude of language determines the latitude of engagement in scholarly work and the altitude of success. Limited language, limits students' engagement and with the limitation, students are penalized for plagiarism. Technology can be used to enable and enhance languaging for different types of student support towards improving epistemological access for success. The language limitation is mainly with regard to the English deficiency. Through language, particularly in English, students can access the content and other goods in higher education.

2. Open and Distance Learning (ODL), by nature, is a cross-cultural endeavour as many programs cross-national and cultural boundaries to reach students. Inherent in this type of programming is the goal to educate global citizens who have intercultural competence to work with people from all around the world, and to allow for international collaboration that promotes mutual development. It is then crucial to ensure that students' intercultural competence is the foundation for Online and Distance Learning, and that faculty and staff also have the necessary intercultural skills to implement such programming.
3. Supervising doctoral candidates through distance mode of delivery poses many challenges for both students and supervisors. The challenges highlighted include; spatial and temporal, workload, technological, giving feedback, and cultural challenges. ICT and ODL make education and training opportunities available to a broader spectrum of the population. Giving structured feedback to Doctoral Students is very important to the success and completion of students studying at a distance. ICT Technologies greatly reduce the spatial separation between supervisors and students.
4. Using WhatsApp can improve students' communication skills, activities, and engagements among others. In addition to using the WhatsApp platform to communicate the challenges they experience with the module, students share news, course resources, and ideas, also use the platform to communicate with their peers and educators which increases their sense of belonging to the university.

Open and Distance Learning Quality Assurance, Infrastructure and Resources
1. The challenges that undermine the achievement of CESA goals include: plagiarism, cheating in examinations where students directly copy from colleagues or bringing foreign materials and impersonations, thus writing examinations on behalf of other students hinged on the social theory of learning. To help curb these challenges, stringent punishment should be meted out to culprits. Plagiarism can be reduced by making available; resources to faculty to enable them carry out research effectively. To help limit impersonations, students should be required to show relevant identification before they are allowed to participate in examinations.
2. To ensure integrity of online examinations, various techniques could be utilized including: randomizing questions and answers where questions are shuffled in a random order every time a student opens the portal to answer them. This technique could be useful for multiple-choice questions. Block copy-pasting where faculties choose an online exam tool that does not allow learners to copy and paste. Practicalizing problem-solving questions where faculties apply concepts to address practical challenges, hence copying virtually eliminated. Identity check through a webcam to match where faculties check the identity of students via web-cam before they are permitted to write the examination. Open book assessment which refers to a situation where students are permitted to refer to textbooks and other relevant material whilst writing an exam.
3. Various factors such as social obligations, investment in economic activities, lack of reliable income, contribute towards making ODL students unable to pay for their ODL

studies which is likely to compromise quality of ODL. There is need for universities to design policies and strategies which will promote timely fee payment and also implement training for students which will enable them to link their study goals and financial resources.

4. Higher education place-based is diminishing and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are potentially disruptive innovation. Big data and new software systems are streamlining the collation and analysis of complex data. Higher education institutions are embracing data mining to gain a better understanding of student performance.

5. Some of the challenges on accessibility of open and distance education to people with disabilities include: inappropriate application and admission procedures; physical barriers such as access to places, content, and service; financial, linguistic and didactic; negative attitudes, inappropriate teaching methods, lack of technologies, family, and personal factors amongst others. Some of the ways to enhance access to Open and Distance Education for PWDs include clear policies on admission that must be implemented to aid enrolment of PWDs. Institutions making room for improvement in funding and financial assistance, as well as adopting new teaching strategies to support PWDs.

6. A significant number of correctional facilities have embraced the use of ODL methodology as a strategy to rehabilitate and equip inmates with livelihood skills. Access and participation of inmates in open distance learning programs have been proven to have a positive influence on the recidivism of offenders. The major challenges undermining effective use of ODL methodology in correctional facilities is low computer literacy levels of prison staff and inadequate information technology infrastructure. There is need for policy transformation in higher education and correctional centers on how students can be helped.

Students and Stakeholders Perceptions of Open and Distance Learning

1. Among the challenges students are likely to experience during ODL exams include: unstable internet connectivity; ICT phobic students and students in remote areas having to travel long distances to examination centers.

2. Challenges on career development for students with disabilities in ODL include: diversity of student disability; disability not having the same effects on all, they differ. Students lacking adequate skills for employment, being either underemployed or unemployed. Other career barriers identified include: economic difficulties, limited or lack of support from family and educational limitations. There is need for improvement of the quality of distance education teaching and learning for students with disabilities (SWD).

3. In teaching practical science subjects in ODL, there is need for virtual laboratories to be embraced to enhance hands on experience for science subjects to enable students taking science subjects in ODL be competitive in the labour market. It is important to devise an effective means of exposing the learners to practical science considering the prevailing conditions

Summary of the Conference Key issues identified

The Conference identified the following key issues and critical success factors:

1. Commitment and investments from government in infrastructure and resources for ODeL
2. Capacity building in Techno-pedagogical skills
3. Use of Artificial Intelligence, with emphasis on Machine Learning, Block Chain Technology and internet of things in enhancing teaching, learning assessments and examinations
4. Role of Open, Distance, E-Learning and TVET in the skills development agenda
5. Policies that build confidence in ODeL through repositioning
6. Inclusivity, social justice and diversity in education
7. Collaborations and partnerships for entrenching and improving response to the new normal

Summary of the Needed Actions

The key to deploy Open and Distance Learning in the transformational Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), The Continental Education Strategy for Africa and Agenda 2063 the Africa We Want are:

1. A paradigm shift from the traditional brick and mortar educational concept to one that embraces openness and technology mediation. This requires a lot of advocacy and regulation of ODL in Africa to safe-guard both the practice and quality.
2. A focus on skills, competency, technology, digital literacy and entrepreneurial-based education with particular emphasis on AI, Machine Learning,
3. Capacity building and resource development for ODL in Africa. In this regard, capacity needs developed for all academic staff in blended learning delivery in Africa not only for those in open and distance environments.
4. Need for a heavy investment in ODL to complement the traditional systems of education to respond to behavioural and technological changes
5. Address the Perceptual Challenges of ODL with hard facts, to de-construct the perception that ODL is inferior
6. Collaborate with the Virtual Institute of Capacity Building for Higher Education, Africa to share practices, experiences and innovations from around the continent.
7. Need for national policies on recognition of prior learning and comprehensive national qualifications framework that allow for different pathways and credentialing. In this regards the UNESCO framework for the recognition of prior learning could be a reference point.

Conference Resolutions
We the delegates attending the virtual 6th ACDE Triennial conference recommend the following resolutions:

1. **Recognize that** traditional methods of teaching/learning are not tenable at all the times
2. **Aware that** the COVID 19 pandemic, has made Open and distance education or technology mediated education an imperative.

3. **Recognize that** achieving SDG 4.3 requires all higher institutions of learning in Africa to come up with flexible modes of teaching/learning and assessments, that allow both women and men to work as well as pursue their studies and acquire needed skills and competences
4. **Cognizant that** embracing technology enabled learning comes with some challenges including, providing the needed resources for all at the national and continental levels, **call on** African governments to prioritize Open and Distance Education and invest in it to cope with the new normal of education
5. **Recognize that s**uccess in transitioning to open distance and e-learning requires concerted efforts of all players/stakeholders in higher education in Africa and collaboration between and among various national, regional and international actors.
6. **Cognizant of** the important role evidence play in decision making **Call on** all actors and players in ODeL to embrace collaboration and partnership in research on innovative approaches in ODeL in Africa.
7. **Aware that** the perceived quality and actual quality of ODL may be compromised **call on** regulatory bodies to pay attention to positioning ODL in making it acceptable to the general public without compromising on quality
8. **Acknowledge tha**t adoption and systematic use of the ACDE QA Toolkit will provide a comprehensive tool for self-assessment as it will measure the Institution's strengths and weaknesses against key ODL practices and processes.
9. **Resolve that** ACDE will certify and publish on their website member institutions that adopt and implement the ACDE Quality Assurance standards in collaboration with national regulatory bodies
10. **Cognizant that** human development is critical to the achievement of the sustainable development goals   and Agenda 2063 which is "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena" – **the Africa we want.**