

21st Century Leadership in Open and Distance learning Environments

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Abstract

The 21st Century brought with it a rapid advancement in technology, so fast that many players in both industry and education were caught napping as their once relevant processes and ways of doing business became absolute. Coupled with the technological leap in advancement, for education in particular was the sudden demand for education provision that lead to an unprecedented massification of education (Maunde, 2003; Mama, 2003, 2005). In Zimbabwe, for example, the massification of education was from around the 1980's onwards. The former ivory tower, single university failed to cop with the many school leavers' demand for a university education (Maunde, 2003; Gaidzanwa, 2007). As such, ODL as a way of university education became a reality. ODL, had the capacity to school thousands of students for a little cost. For example, technological advancement, reduced distances between tutor and tutee to zero (see Brown and Brown, 1994). With digitalisation of the education provision, space requirements such as classrooms became minimal. In leadership terms, the 21st educational environment, particularly, ODL learning environment, cried out for a certain type of leader. It was no longer business as usual. With digitalisation, the education provision game had changed completely (Brown and Brown, 1994). It called for a certain type of leader, at every level of an educational institution. In conclusion, leadership of ODL institutions of the 21st century should aim to produce graduates that are critical, innovative, collaborative, communicative, information literate, media literate and technology literate. Moreover, they should be equipped with leadership skills. Institutional leadership should also aim to train staff members in particular, academics to be literate in all the above. A major recommendation was that institutional leadership should create academic programmes that are built around the 21st Century digital technologies.

Key words: Leadership, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), 21st Century

Introduction

The 21st Century brought with it a rapid advancement in technology, coupled with a high demand for the educational service. There was an unprecedented massification of education (Mama, 2003, 2005; Maunde, 2003). In Zimbabwe, the one university of UZ, failed to cop with the many school leavers that demanded university education (Gaidzanwa, 2007). The solution lay in the introduction of ODL as a way of university educational provision as it had the capacity to school
thousands of students at the same time and at low cost. It was not business as usual, the situation called for a new type of institutional leader. This paper is a Plenary Session delivery made by the author at the 1st Zimbabwe Open University International Conference on Teacher Development held in March, 2016. It is based on the researcher’s experiences as well as the findings from past research work by the author and desk research in the field of Higher Education Leadership and Management. A brief background and Literature review to the problem will be given followed by a discussion of research findings. Finally conclusions and recommendations in the form of a way forward will be given.

**Open and Distance Learning**

Distance education has been defined as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner (Brown and Brown, 1994). Open learning, in turn, is an organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimised in terms either of access, or of time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these (UNESCO, 2001). The term ‘open and distance learning’ is used as an umbrella term to cover educational approaches of this kind that reach teachers in their schools, provide learning resources for them, or enable them to qualify without attending college in person, or open up new opportunities for keeping up to date no matter where or when they want to study (UNESCO, 2001). The flexibility inherent in Open and Distance Learning, and the fact that it can be combined with a full or near full-time job, makes it particularly appropriate for the often widely distributed force of teachers and school managers.

Historically, on the African continent, University of South Africa (UNISA), has been a major provider of distance education and teacher education at tertiary level throughout the southern African region from the 1940’s (see UNESCO, 1998, 2000, 2001). In the early 1980s and 1990s, UNISA’s main role in teacher education was to provide upgrading programmes for serving primary and secondary teachers at the diploma and graduate levels (UNESCO, 1998, 2000). From the mid-1990s, UNISA has undergone a period of change in attempting to respond to new national priorities in teacher education and to improve the quality of some of its services (such as learner support). Since 1998, UNISA has offered two teacher education programmes at Bachelor’s degree level, for primary and secondary teachers (BPrimEd and BSecEd) (see UNESCO, 2001). These can be taken as in-service or pre-service programmes by students with appropriate levels of entry qualifications. The main medium used is print. These print materials are complemented by face-to-face contact sessions (discussion classes), practical work and some on-line learning activities. UNISA is in the process of integrating Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and World Wide Web (WWW) technologies into their programmes and this is expected to grow (see UNESCO, 2000, 2001). In the case of China, the provision of large-scale teacher education through a national distance teaching institution, the China Television Teachers College (CTVTC), a part of the China Central Radio and Television University (CCRTVU) was done since 1994. Distance education is included in China’s strategic planning for teacher education and plays a significant role in initial teacher education and continuing professional development (see UNESCO, 2001).

A number of other countries on a global basis also offered Teacher Education through Distance Learning as revealed by a number of case studies contracted by UNESCO in 2001. For example, Chile, Brazil, Burkina Faso, India, Nigeria, Mongolia and the United Kingdom.
According to UNESCO (2001), the studies represent an interesting mix of applications of different modes of distance learning. According to UNESCO, 2001, globally, there is still the need for more and better teachers. UNESCO (2001), recognised that there were still more than 100 million children out of school, who needed teachers as the world moved towards 2015 targeted as the year of education for all. According to UNESCO (2001), the world needs to raise the skills of the existing 60 million teachers, too many of whom are untrained and unqualified. UNESCO (2001), points out that beyond 2015, the skills and knowledge needed by all teachers are no longer fixed and familiar targets but moving ones. Hence, they say, teachers need more opportunities than ever before to go on learning throughout their careers. According to UNESCO (2000, 2001), one of the ways of strengthening the teaching profession is to use distance education or open and distance learning. From the leadership side UNESCO, in 2000, looked at organisational structures, and the kinds of organisations that provide teacher-education programmes, and the different patterns of funding. Also looked at were the technologies, ranging from print to computers, and the relationship between work done through the technologies and work done face-to-face, including all-important issues about classroom practice. According to UNESCO (2000), many countries still do not have enough teachers.

Moreover, in some, the expansion needed in the teaching force is far beyond the capacity of traditional colleges. The supply of teachers is also adversely affected in countries where retention rates are low for newly trained teachers or where significant numbers of teachers are being lost through HIV and AIDS or in rural areas which have difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers (UNESCO, 2000, 2001; OECD, 2001). Teacher quality is an issue in most countries. Many teachers are untrained or underqualified or teaching subjects in which they are not qualified or trained. In addition, teachers face a widening range of demands and roles (UNESCO, 2000, 2001; OECD, 2001).

Additionally, national governments, international organisations and specific circumstances continually set new goals: gender parity by 2005 and universal basic education by 2015; inclusive education; education for democracy, peace and social cohesion; multi-grade teaching; increased accountability for achieving learning targets; the development of learners who are self-managing and independent, skilled in critical thinking and problem solving, equipped with life-skills; the preparation of learners who are competent for knowledge-based economies, capable in the use of information technology; and the expansion of teachers’ roles to include social work in communities where child-headed households and orphans are common as a result of HIV and AIDS (UNESCO, 2001).

In the light of the foregoing, Distance education has been used to teach, support and develop teachers for many years. Furthermore, the history of distance education for teachers, especially in developing countries, is littered with the bones of short-term projects which have served their purpose and been discarded (until the next crisis in teacher education) (UNESCO, 2000, 2001). The established distance teaching universities here have provided teacher education programmes alongside others. Through their regional infrastructures, they have increased access to programmes and professional development opportunities for teachers (UNESCO, 2000, 2001).

Over the years UNESCO funded case studies show that distance education for teachers receives funds from all four of the most usual sources of funds for education: from government budgets, from student fees, from the private and NGO sector and from funding agencies. Several programmes receive funding from a combination of sources so that, for example, the programmes in both China and Nigeria are funded partly by government and partly by student fees (UNESCO, 2000).
The African Virtual University

The African Virtual University provides online and distance education services to many existing universities across Africa. The AVU has more than 50 academic partner institutions in more than 27 countries in Africa. It helps partner institutions set up local study centres in different countries, where programmes from numerous partner institutions, learner support and guidance, and access to e-learning technologies are made available. To date there are 10 such centres, in 10 different countries. The main focus at the moment is on teacher education, with four bachelor programmes for teachers of mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology, offered through a consortium of 12 universities in 10 African countries. Delivery is mixed mode, through online learning and attendance at local centres. AVU though also offers or facilitates a wide range of webinars, self-learning programmes, workshops, and certificate/diploma programmes, in collaboration with the partner institutions. AVU also offers student scholarships (UNESCO, 2000, 2001; OECD, 2001).

Discussion

Leadership

Leadership has been defined by scholars in many ways. For example, leadership can be regarded collectively as the individuals who are the leaders in an organization or the activity of leading a group of people or an organization or the ability to do this. It involves establishing a clear vision, sharing that vision with others so that they will follow willingly, providing the information, knowledge and methods to realize that vision, and coordinating and balancing the conflicting interests of all members and stakeholders. Van Schalkwyk (2011), defined leadership as the mobilisation and influencing of people to work towards a common goal through the building of interpersonal relationships and the breaking of tradition to achieve the organisation’s objectives despite risk and uncertainty. In the views of Kouzes and Posner (2007) this is achieved by engaging in the following leadership practices: modelling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act and encouraging the heart.

Moreover, in the views of some scholars, a leader steps up in times of crisis, and is able to think and act creatively in difficult situations. Unlike management, leadership cannot be taught, although it may be learned and enhanced through coaching or mentoring. Leaders inspire subordinates to perform and engage in achieving a goal. Leadership has been described in many ways, for example, authoritarian, laissez-faire, chaotic, inter alia. Some scholars have argued that there is a leadership continuum from laissez-faire to authoritarian with other forms such as democratic falling in the middle. In the academic set up, the colleagueship model of leadership was propounded.

21st Century: the period from 1st January 2001 through 2100 AD

Innovative leadership for ODL

The 21st Century brought with it a rapid advancement in technology which ushered in many opportunities for communication. The distance education provider now had opportunity to offer service in many cost effective ways. Instead of the print module, the mode of delivery can now be in electronic form. For example, many distance education providers migrated to e-learning among other web-based teaching and learning platforms. Nevertheless, there were significant challenges experienced by the ICDE membership. Some of the challenges had to do with academic
recognition. However, over time open, distance and online learning have become more accepted and (Massive Open Online Courses) MOOCs have propelled this acceptance even further (see Robinson, 1997).

At the same time, ODL institutions have major challenges from conventional universities, particularly for the open and online space despite having much to offer, particularly in terms of cost-effectiveness, flexibility and quality. The new players, conventional institutions have invaded the ODL market space with a variety of semi or near ODL modes of delivery to deliver courses competitively with ODL institutions (see Burns, 2011). For example, in Zimbabwe, some conventional universities are now offering courses on Block release and parallel evening programmes. Further challenges, particularly in developing countries arise from funds availability for equipment purchase, poor internet network systems and infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, poverty among students, computer literacy skills among both students and lecturers, accessibility to technological equipment inter alia.

Moreover, with the advent of managerialism, universities have grown into large bureaucratic structures with professional managers (Perkin, 2007; Kogan and Teichler, 2007). The bureaucratisation of universities, as the need for professional management and bureaucratic systems of control come into effect globally, has put academic freedom at risk as academic faculty autonomy was lost (Perkin, 2007; Kogan and Teichler, 2007). Academic freedom is important for academics to be able to debate, research and publish important social and other issues without any hindrance or interference from the government. In this manner the conditions for knowledge production are created. Furthermore, while in the past, for most workers the key job skills were: Knowing the job, following instructions, keeping good relations with others, hard work, being professional, efficient, timely, honest and fair. Although still needed today, and taught very well in the school system, the 21st Century work environment, demands a different set of work skills suited for the fast changing technologies and mass information overload.

While these are still needed today, and are taught very well in the school system, the 21st Century work environment, calls for a different set of work skills suited for the fast changing technologies and mass information overload. In this new information age, the work environment demands new skills. There is need for workers who are:

- Critical.
- Innovative and creative.
- Problem solving.
- Team workers.
- Communicators through multimedia.
- Adaptable to the ever changing technological landscape through fast learning.

Institutional leadership at any level in the 21st Century educational environment therefore demands for a smart leadership which communicates and is information loaded, solution seeking, critical thinking and creative, well networked both locally and globally, team workers capable of collaboration and partnership formation as well as multimedia fluent. The skills demanded should now match the job requirements for effective and efficient leadership. The leadership should also be aware of National and global education goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s), and STEM. The leadership should be aware of the student skills required for the 21st Century and offer relevant programmes to students. There is need for students to know enough about Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics to contribute significantly to or fully benefit from the knowledge based economy of the 21st developmental landscape. Educational leaders should avoid disparity of skills between work and learning by providing students with skills that are relevant for this period. Hence
accountable leadership is called for in the 21st Century education environment.

Shahmandi, et al. (2011) urged university leaders to improve their leadership competencies to enable their institutions to survive and continuously develop. These competencies include leadership skills, communication skills, persuasive skills and professional skills. Additionally, Yang (2005) identified four categories of leadership competencies namely: personality and disposition, personal knowledge and skill, administrative competency and social responsibility competency that can aid leadership. However, Bargh, Scott and Smith (1996) and Rowley (1997) observed that university Vice Chancellors that were appointed were usually prominent academics who did not possess any formal training beyond their academic credentials, achievements and experiences in the academia. In the face of the challenges facing higher education today, there is need for a paradigm shift and appointing a new breed of university leaders capable of navigating a new complex environment. As alluded to earlier, the advent of managerialism and the bureaucratisation of the university management landscape call for such leadership installment in the universities.

Briefly, ODL leadership at whatever level in the 21st Century learning environment are required to produce graduates with a unique set of abilities in order for them to succeed in this digital age. Students should have: learning skills: Critical thinking, Creative thinking, Collaborating, Communication, Information literacy, Media literacy, Technology literacy, Flexibility, Initiative, Social skills, Productivity, Leadership (The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21)).

The 21st Century working and learning environment in ODL

ODL institutional leadership has to evolve in order to suite the new work environment. From my close observations and work as a researcher into leadership in open and distance learning, I have learnt a number of things over the years. For example, the key movers in post high school education have shifted due to a number of factors as follows:

1. With massification of education provision, access to post-secondary education has increased in conventional institutions. Therefore for most ODL institutions, the question of access is no longer a vantage point for student recruitment purposes. It is now more about affordability. How much does it cost for a student to acquire an education. With massification of higher education, issues of quality come to the fore. However, in some developing countries, access in conventional institutions, remains an issue. ODL leadership can therefore, leverage on quality of offering as well as targeting the marginalized and poorly paid groups in society through the offering of affordable courses to them.

2. For socio-economic development purposes, as alluded to earlier, the 21st Century has brought about a paradigm shift towards the development of workers who are knowledgeable, critical thinkers, innovators, collaborators/ team workers, imbued in modern day communication skills such as multi-media literacy, communication skills including technical literacy. The 21st Century ODL leadership should therefore move away from the mainly text and other less digitalized pedagogical models adopted by large ODL institutions in order to develop the aforementioned skills as required in the 21st Century work place. They need to steer their management teams towards the achievement of these skills by students and workers themselves.

3. As alluded to earlier, there is an increased competition in the ODL landscape with many conventional universities moving into the ODL market place. This scenario has been exacerbated by the development
of MOOCs, Webinars, open educational resources, online courses inter alia by conventional universities. These are no longer the prerogative of ODL institutions.

Leadership that confronts head-on the existing institutional cultures

The difficulty often experienced by large bureaucratic organizations such as universities or ODL institutions is the slowness with which changes are effected exacerbated by in some cases, resistance arising from the fear to change. People are afraid of change and new things. They often want to stick to the “knitting”. There is often a challenge to shift quickly to new models of delivery and throw away the old technologies on a massive scale when large student numbers are involved. There are sometimes challenges of a technical skills gap which is at times difficult to fill etc.

In order to achieve critical goals in the 21st Century, ODL leadership at every level needs to:

1. Set up SMART objectives together with all stakeholders in the organization including the implementers. In order for the goals to be achieved, there must be a buy in from those that implement them. There is need for the product offering to be of high quality and different in many ways from those of others for a competitive edge.

2. Faculty and all stakeholders such as technical support staff need to be involved in designing courses around the new web-based multi-media instructional technologies of the 21st Century e.g My Vista at ZOU inter alia.

3. Involve, the implementers in the Faculties in operational decision making and train both staff and students in the new instructional technologies and how to use them.

4. Manage the costs of developing new course designs and delivery models from a business perspective.

Conclusions and recommendations

21st Century ODL institutional leaders should strive to:

1. Produce graduates that are critical, innovative, collaborative, communicative, information literate, media literate, technology literate, with leadership skills instilled in them etc. and train staff members in particular academics to be literate in all the above.

2. Create academic programmes that are built around the 21st Century digital technologies

3. Make flexible policies that are in favour of open admission

4. Through mass student numbers in programmes, achieve an affordable low cost per student per programme as well as organize donor support and low interest loans for poor students.

5. Achieve state of the art online learner support services.

6. Train all faculty in online teaching.

7. To enter into collaborative partnerships that pay equal dividends and enhance student qualifications.

8. Produce teacher development models that address national teacher minimum standards and benchmarked with the best institutional standards on a global basis.

References

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21).