Problems and limits of the Open and Distance Learning project in Africa
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Abstract
The systematic attempt to ignore and dismiss the ODL project by some African elites is cause for concern. There is often devaluation and an internalised sense of inadequacy attributed to Open and Distance Learning by some African scholars. In its real sense, education is a compulsion for Africans to ‘lighten their darkness’. Some colonised academics with the mentality that education is only attained through the formal system have fallen victim of a resilient colonial and colonising epistemology, which takes formal education as ‘the’ ideology and hegemony. This study calls for listening to the voices of ordinary men and women who are challenging the prescriptive gaze and grip of emasculated elite. Africanisation is generally seen to signal a renewed focus on Africa, on reclamation of what has been taken from Africa, and, as such, it forms part of post-colonialist, anti-racist discourse. With regard to knowledge, it comprises a focus on indigenous African knowledge and concerns simultaneously ‘legitimation’ and ‘protection from exploitation’ of this knowledge. With regard to education, the focus is on Africanisation of institutions, curricula, syllabi and criteria for excellence in research, performance, among others. This paper spells out the problems and challenges that limit the success of the ODL project in Africa. The paper calls for paying more attention to ODL as a way of gaining knowledge. The major challenge is that of overcoming bad mentality of some African elite and their negative perceptions of the ODL project, lack of financial support and political support, among others. African scholars need to enter into genuine and critical dialogical encounters with other pyramids of knowledge for a paradigm shift.

Key terms: Africanisation, scholarship, Open and Distance Learning, education

Background
Although some people carry negative perceptions about Open and Distance Learning, there are success stories to it. It is sad to note that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is rated as second class education by some African scholars who have the negative mentality of looking at some forms of education as underdogs. Such people consider ODL to be a low status activity in higher education institutions. To that end, a professor engaging in this field runs the risk of losing status and reputation (Simpson, 2009). Such notions are really misguided and lack insight. This seems to give the mortality base of ODL in most African countries. Higher education is widely acknowledged for its many contributions to contemporary society. Universities enhance the personal and professional lives of all who attend, and through scholarship and public service, these institutions enrich the intellectual, economic, and cultural fabric of their communities, states, nations, and beyond. As Frank Rhodes, president emeritus of Cornell explained,

higher education informs public understanding, cultivates public taste, and contributes to the nation’s well-being as it nurtures and trains each new generation of architects, artists, authors, business leaders, engineers, farmers, lawyers, physicians, poets, scientists, social workers, and teachers as well as a steady succession of advocates, dreamers, doers, dropouts, parents, politicians, preachers, prophets, social reformers, visionaries, and volunteers who leave, nudge, and shape the course of public life (Frank, 2001, p. xi).

ODL enhances the provision of education that is both effective and relevant to the needs of students and that is challenging in a number of ways. Central to this model of distance learning is the independent autonomous learner who, guided by a course activities calendar and drawing on a range of ‘prepackaged’ audio and text materials, can study at their own pace. The support of a tutor is provided to mediate the materials and aid learning (Watts, 2010). Critical to understanding an educational concept is one’s ability to comprehend information read. It is not all about the teacher standing in front the learner. ODL has mature learners who seek knowledge and skills mostly to perfect their jobs.

Conceptual frameworks
Scholarship
According to Humboldt as cited in Elton (2009, p. 248) the word scholarship is a translation of the German word Wissenschaft, and it can be traced back to Humboldt’s famous prescription for the future University of Berlin. Humboldt was concerned with both research and teaching, and he established a fundamental dichotomy between university and school, according to which the university, in contrast to school, treats scholarship always ‘in terms of not yet completely solved problems, whether in research or teaching, while school is concerned essentially with agreed and accepted knowledge’. The consequence, as he says in a most thought-provoking sentence of his memorandum, is that in universities,

the teacher is then not there for the sake of the student, but both have their justification in the service of scholarship (Humboldt as cited in Elton, 2009, p. 248).

The word scholarship simply refers to the demonstration of academic prowess, that is, to exhibit scholarship or knowledge (Usher, 2007, p. 967). Scholarship was narrowly defined as the advancement of knowledge in terms of discovery and articulation of new knowledge in the specialised research areas. The researchers at the Carnegie Foundation formulated a broader vision of what it meant to be a
scholar, and suggested there were four scholarships, those of discovery, integration, application and teaching (Boyer, 1990). This implies that extending the discovery of the knowledge to integration, application and teaching are complimentary elements in a holistic conception of academic scholarship. These four concepts have been widely accepted and have been prevalent in the discussion of scholarship in higher education.

Africanisation
Makgoba, vice-chancellor of the University of Natal, provides the following working definition:

Africanisation is not about expelling Europeans and their cultures, but about affirming African culture and their identity in a world community. It is not a process of exclusion, but of inclusion. It is a learning process and a way of life for Africans. It involves incorporating, adapting and integrating other cultures into and through African visions to provide the dynamism, evolution and flexibility so essential in the global village. Africanisation is the process of defining or interpreting African identity and culture. It is informed by the experience of the African Diaspora and has endured and matured over time from the narrow nationalistic intolerance to an accommodating, realistic and global form (Makgoba, 1997, p. 199).

Open and Distance Learning
ODL is a phenomenon that was initiated in Europe during the sixties as an open and distance teaching scheme at higher education level by the British Open University (OU). Intended to offer a second chance to mature students, “open” refers in its original context to openness of access (in contrast to the severe entrance restrictions that govern access to traditional British universities). ODL does not mean education for mentally challenged people nor does it mean educating the uneducable. Many governments have faced the problem of access by many people into the higher education arena. Distance teaching was simply regarded as a necessity at this point, to allow students to mix their study, often part-time, with work. Although the pedagogy of the British OU has been the model for similar initiatives across the world, the emphasis shifted gradually from teaching into learning, and the concept of ODL changed into a more generic one, referring to all kinds of flexible learning instead of being restricted to open learning/teaching at a distance (Confederation as cited in Van den Branden and Lambert, 2000). Hence, also the obvious link with the idea of lifelong learning, which serves to change conventional curricula, including academic ones, into more generic models for learning.

The introduction of ODL, often in combination with information and communication technologies, should be considered as a response to changes in the culture of education, that is, the need to shift from a teaching to a learning pedagogy, the needs of society (lifelong learning, internationalisation), and wider contextual pressures (rationalisation of education). This combination of influences is, in fact, recommended as a powerful tool to prepare and restructure the university for the future (CRE as cited in Van den Branden and Lambert, 2000). ODL is considered to be extremely relevant to the creation of citizenship, and a necessary pre-condition to the establishment of a fully operational continent.

Theoretical framework: Constructivist theory
Constructivist learning theory originated from a larger constructivist epistemology. Constructivist epistemology acknowledges multiple, socially constructed truths, perspectives, and realities versus a single reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It speaks to the need for socio-cultural contextualization of education in a country whose population is increasingly diversified in ethnic and national backgrounds and spoken languages. Constructivist learning theory draws on developmental theories of Kelly (1991) and Piaget (1977) and suggests that learning is an active process and that learners construct and reconstruct information to learn (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). In other words, individuals develop ways of understanding the world and making sense of new information by associating with what they already know. What learners already know has been constructed from life experiences and may differ from what is taught in formal settings (Bulman, 2005). Aspects of constructivist thought in education include inquiry into and sensitivity to learners’ previous experiences, appreciation for multiple perspectives, awareness of possible differences between learners’ and instructors’ goals, and the importance of embedding learning in social context (Ernest, 1995).

In contrast, traditional views of teaching and learning within the positivist paradigm assume that there exists a given, identifiable body of knowledge and that the function of schools and instructors is to teach passive students these conventionally accepted truths (Brooks, 1984). The role of the instructor in constructivism is not the central role, responsible for dispensing truth, but one of facilitator of a learning environment wherein students take active, central roles. Because of its philosophical basis, constructivist learning theory can fittingly support a course for students with vastly different backgrounds, promoting respect for diverse life experiences and building on existing knowledge, perceptions, and values. It can also support varying viewpoints. There is need for pedagogical consensus in relation to ODL learning. Constructivism has an emphasis on collaborative learning, authentic task, reflection, and dialogue, as well as the promotion of identities and learning communities. Such an approach, Mayes argues, results from two distinct shifts of emphasis:

1. a shift from a “representational” view of learning in which learning is viewed as being “acquired” to a “constructivist” or “constructionist” view in which learning is primarily developed through activity;
2. a shift away from a focus on the individual, towards an emphasis on social contexts for learning (Mayes as cited in McLinden, McCall, Hinton and Weston, 2006).
Literature

ODL is a way of passing on knowledge to students and equally contributes to the development of the mind and that of the nation. Misconceptions of how knowledge is disseminated have to be cleared if at all Africa should benefit from the ODL project. Boyer (1990) presented an idealistic scholarship of integration in higher education that recognised the contextual and systemic features of knowledge development and dissemination: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Discovery is investigative in nature and the most valued. It is through discovery that ODL students gain knowledge and once grasped, the knowledge becomes useful and functional. Some people think that standing in front of students teaching them is the only way through which knowledge is gained. The module that ODL institutions in Africa use is a valuable teaching tool. Teaching is the fourth component of scholarship and the least valued within academia (Boyer, 1990). The argument ventilated by Boyer is that, in scholarship, teaching is not what makes one a learner but there are various strategies of passing on knowledge. Universities are caught with the problem of replication if students wait for the teaching process where one stands in front of the class.

Boyer maintained that the ability to pass on knowledge in a way that is clearly understood by students and to expand knowledge by associating with students should be highly valued. The integration element of scholarship occurs when a scholar takes isolated concepts and places them in a larger context that gives new meaning to an emerging perspective. Making connections across disciplines is a major means for contextualizing knowledge. Boyer also observed that knowledge was not necessarily first “discovered” and then “applied” but that knowledge could emerge from application (Boyer as cited in Nelson and Southern, 2008).

Application involves service-related activities geared toward applying knowledge/scholarship to solving individual and community problems (Nelson and Southern, 2008). Boyer asserted that all four elements of scholarship (discovery, integration, application, and teaching) dynamically interact to form a holistic entity and that there is no linear or causal relationship leading from discovery to application. Instead, he described an interactive process that seems recursive in nature and indicates, for example, that teaching could inform both research and application, and that research could inform application and teaching.

It is argued that the goals of education are changing from “teaching to facilitating learning, to empowering students to be reflective learners” (Miller, 1996, p. 40) ODL can provide important functions not only in increasing learner access to education, but also in facilitating interaction among students, and between students and tutors, thereby opening up new opportunities for the learner to participate in learning communities. Similarly, with an eye to the future, it is argued that ODL provides an opportunity to teach in a way that can meet the fundamental needs of a new and rapidly changing society, new approaches to teaching and learning will be required in order to exploit the unique features of the society and meet the widely different needs of learners.

It is argued that tutors can cause failure to the success of the ODL project if they lack knowledge of principles of learner centred methodology. McCombs et al. (2005) indicated that online educators should implement these 14 learner-centred psychological principles into curriculum design. These principles included: 1) nature of the learning process, 2) goals of the learning process, 3) construction of knowledge, 4) strategic thinking, 5) thinking about thinking, 6) context of learning, 7) motivational and emotional influences on learning, 8) intrinsic motivation to learn, 9) effects of motivation on effort, 10) developmental influences on learning, 11) social influences on learning, 12) individual differences in learning, 13) learning and diversity, 14) standards and assessment.

Research methodology

The study was qualitative and employed semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis to gather data. Purposive sampling was used to select participants.

Results

Negative attitudes by some people

Some people who gone to learn in universities outside Africa think that ODL is second best. These findings are consistent with the findings made by McHarazo and Olden (2000) who noted that when the first university colleges were established in Nigeria and elsewhere after World War II they were looked down upon as second-best by those who associated higher education with travelling to Britain to study (Yoloye as cited in McHarazo and Olden, 2000). For those who entered, it was a ‘venture of faith, for none of us knew for certain what the new institution would turn out to be’ (Awe, 1981, 67). Today in Africa the public needs to appreciate that higher education does not necessarily mean full-time attendance at a traditional university.

Lack of adequate support services

Open and Distance Learning students require adequate support services in order to take the programmes with ease. Some African countries do not give such support to the ODL learners. What is important is have a political will and craft policies that actually support the project. Africa should not pay lip-service to the implementation of ODL. Student support service is the engine propelling the ODL project. Student support services, such as admission services, library access and services, financial aid, and advisement to meet the “cognitive, affective, and administrative needs of the student” (Daniel & Mackintosh, 2003, p. 819; Berge, 2003), are vital to the success of any distance education programme.
Lack of government funding
Respondents aired the sentiments that Open and Distance Learning students lack funding from most African governments unlike conventional students who get sponsorship. This gives a gap in terms of implementation. In convensional settings, students get loans and grants every semester. This is not happening to students following the ODL mode. Lack of such support services results in most learners following the campus based mode.

Mass media used for negative publicity of ODL
Respondents had this to say:

The media of mass communication is a key factor in downplaying the ODL project in Africa. Instead of acting to promote the learning mode, distorted negative reports are published and this destroys the image of ODL.

Acceptance concerns
Respondents noted that ODL has long been introduced as an instructional tool in universities but skeptics decried it as devaluation of education. Although ODL is an effective mode of learning, the acceptance variable is very low. Many effective instructional technologies of distance education have been in use for years but getting some people to adopt the mode is often a stumbling block of distance learning.

Lack of training in learner centred pedagogy used in ODL
The tutors in most ODL universities are products of the conventional system which uses traditional centred pedagogies where the lecturer knows it all. Student satisfaction surveys done to ODL students have shown that most tutorial sessions are of poor quality. Tutors do not come fully prepared for their work and rely much on lecture methods. They seem to think that ODL students are not equally competent and do not bring the much needed interactive methodologies. This becomes a limitation to the success of ODL because lack of satisfaction by the learners draws back the project.

Olson and Wisher (2002) carried a study on the instructors’ knowledge of distance education mode and found many cases where faculty members were not trained adequately in online instructional design. Such lack of training results in poor quality presentation of tutorials by the tutors. ODL tutors need proper knowledge of learner centred pedagogies in order to be effective. McCombs and Whisler (1997) defined the learner-centred paradigm based on these principles:

- The perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners) (McCombs and Whisler, 1997, p. 9).

Tutors in ODL should run away from the traditional system of teaching. Many commentators in the distance education literature argue forcefully that distance education requires a radically new pedagogy, a qualitatively different pedagogy built on a unique relationship between the instructor and the students. Traditional education, they write, is bad education, characterised by a boring lecturer leaning on the podium in a stifling lecture hall, droning on while reading from yellowed notes. Students sit passively, watching the dust motes hang in the shafts of sunlight, struggling to stay awake and take notes so that next week they can repeat what the lecturer told them about the world. After the test is over, students forget the lecturer’s wise insights faster than you can drag a file to the recycle bin (Markel, 1999).

Lack of infrastructure
Respondents highlighted that the limits to the success of ODL in Africa is centred on lack of infrastructure. Infrastructure like the availability of electricity, computers, and the Internet is not yet fully in place to enhance the e-learning project. E-learning in Africa is at its infancy stage (Unwin, 2008). Simpson (2009) argues that the assumption that students can readily access e-learning opportunities merits closer scrutiny. Infrastructure like the availability of computers and the internet are a cause for concern in most African countries. For e-learning to succeed in the developing world, it needs to build on another important pillar, the existence of infrastructure, along with some degree of connectivity (Gunawardana, 2005). Most students pursuing higher education through ODL come from the remote rural areas where there is no electricity and the internet connectivity. This poses limitations to the success of e-learning which is a useful mode of learning in ODL in the world.

Limited computer and library resources
Higher education students cannot work effectively without adequate library facilities and access to modern technologies. Access to computers and library facilities varies widely and is dependent on the culture within each country. Whilst all countries have some level of traditional library facility, these are seriously under-equipped and ill-funded. In recent years computers, with their ‘searching’ function, have come to be regarded as libraries enabling instant access to a wide spectrum of information resources. Learners studying through ODL, without access to these resources, are likely to have a much more limited learning experience (Open University, 2009a). Computers and Internet have become so dominant elements of popular culture, that students simply expect teaching in higher education to be exploiting these media. There is need for trained library staff to support the students in ODL. Trained, qualified, motivated library staff is essential for the success of the ODL project.
Conclusions
The major challenge is that of overcoming bad mentality of some African elite and their negative perceptions of the ODL project, lack of financial support and political support, among others. The ODL project suffers from lack of adequate government funding, lack of acceptance by some top officials who make decisions to thwart efforts to develop nations under the pretext of lowering of standards and limited internet connectivity in most of the rural areas. Some ODL users also lack training and pedagogy in the provision of the service.

Recommendations
The paper calls for paying more attention to ODL as a way of gaining knowledge. African scholars need to enter into genuine and critical dialogical encounters with other pyramids of knowledge for a paradigm shift. There is need for the African governments to inject adequate funding in order to promote the ODL project. ODL students should be supported with grants and loans right from the governments so that they benefit from their national cakes just like other conventional students. There is need for staff development and training of ODL users in pedagogy and service provision since this sector deals with the adult learner who could be a manager, a minister, an external student with a different culture, among other variables. Internet connectivity has to be improved particularly in rural areas where most of the ODL learners come from. There is need for mobile libraries where the learners can get books closer to their places of stay. It is also noted with concern that governments should craft policies that promote the provision of ODL without leaving the products and users to criticism by perpetrators of the system.

References


