Democratising Higher Education: Reflections on Promises, *Challenges and Prospects* of Implementing ODL in Developing countries

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Abstract

Believing that increasing higher education enrolment would improve the quality of the population and enhance national competitiveness in the globalizing world, Ethiopia has recorded a dramatic expansion in higher education in the last two decades. This has been coupled with increasingly privatized and marketwise strategies to create education opportunities to meet the pressing demand for higher education. But, access to higher education has never moved from being a benefit for the elite to a means by which members of the general population (mass) can improve their life chances under the magical formula of the sociologist Trow's definition of three-stage higher education development (Trow,1973). Being a latecomer to higher education development, Ethiopia has made serious attempts to expand higher education enrolment in the last few decades and according to the growth and transformation plan of the education sector (ESDP V,2015), the government aimed to achieve a gross enrolment rate of 15 per cent by 2020 from the current 9.47 % gross enrollment. On one hand; rapidly increasing demands for all levels and forms of education, coupled with local and regional governments' limited capacity to expand provision of education through traditional bricks-and- mortar institutions, leaves higher education to remain elite education; on the other hand; this further forces to launch alternative systems so as to respond to growing need of higher education such as open and distance learning (ODL) and massive open and online courses (MOOC). The objective of this paper is to reflect opportunities, challenges and prospects of implementing ODL to transform the growing demand of higher education from current elite system(less than 15% accessibility) to mass (15 to 50%) to universal (more than 50%) systems of higher education in Ethiopian context from global experiences.

***Key words**: higher education, elite to mass, ODL, MOOC*

Introduction

While the last decades have seen considerable growth in education and training, the world still suffers from intolerable inequalities at the international level and sometimes within nations (UNESCO, 2002). Many countries are struggling with limited access to education and training for children and young people, and at the same time have to address the basic needs of an older generation. Low quality and insufficient relevance are other concerns. The rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the move towards more knowledge-intensive, interdependent and internationalized societies create new challenges and opportunities for the design and delivery of education. ICTs open up new horizons for progress and the exchange of creativity and intercultural dialogue. Nevertheless the growing digital divide is actually leading to greater inequalities in development. This is giving rise to paradoxical

situations where those who have the greatest need of them - disadvantaged groups, rural communities, illiterate populations or even entire countries - do not have access to the tools which would enable them to become full-fledged members of the knowledge society. It is obvious that due to limitations in resources; both human and financial, the traditional conventional approach (closed, face to face) of teaching in classrooms can no longer satisfy the snowballing population of a country via campus based or traditional approach. When conventional systems and approaches cannot meet the needs, it is necessary to look for new strategies. Confidence seems to be growing that open and distance learning is such a strategy. Jegede (2003) observed that all nations of the world desirous of a cost-effective, convenient, conducive, efficient and comprehensive way to educate all its citizens have embraced Open and Distance learning'. Greenberg (1998) defines contemporary distance learning as "a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning" (pg. 36). Teaster and Blieszner (1999) say "the term distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods: however, its primary distinction is that the teacher and the learner are separate in space and possibly time" (pg. 741). Desmond Keegan (1995) gives the most thorough definition saying that distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to "a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained" (pg. 7). From these definitions we can see that the student and teacher are separated by space, but not necessarily by time. This would include compressed video, which is delivered in real time. The convenience of time and space is a big promise made by distance learning. Students do not have to physically be with the instructor in space and, depending on the method used, they do not have to be together in time as well. Several terms are used interchangeably to refer to distance education. Among the more commonly used terms are the following: correspondence education, home study, independent study, external studies, continuing education, distance teaching, self instruction, adult education, technology-based or mediated education, learner centre education, open learning, open access, flexible learning, distributed learning, distance learning, ODL/Open and Distance learning, and MOOC/ massive on line open courses. The compound concept distance education subsumes other terms as most of the terms merely address specific aspect of distance education (Keegan, 1996). Distance learning is used as a term to describe the student-centeredness of distance education and it deals with the use of print and electric technologies to present individual lessons to learners at a distance. Distance teaching refers to the didactic strategies of delivery of instruction to students, and this is instructor-centered. Correspondence study entails distance education through the postal sub-groups. That is, learning at home and communicating with instructors using the print materials as fundamental element of distance education. Home study was used extensively in United States of America but condemned as a term for distance education because distance learner may not, in fact, study at home or may study part at home and part at other places (Keegan, 1996). External study is a form of education that is external to but not separated from the faculty staff of the institution offering distance education programme.

Independent study is used for a range of teaching-learning activities, which indicates students' control over learning time, pace and place. However, this is misconstrued as independence from an educational institution which is not usually the case (Keegan, 1996; Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra; 2001). The term Open and Distance learning reflects both the fact that all or most of teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the leaner, and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure (UNESCO,2002). Massive open online courses (MOOCs), aimed at large-scale interactive participation and open access via the web or other network technologies, are recent developments in distance education. A number of other terms (distributed learning, e-learning, online learning, etc.) are used roughly synonymously with distance education. However distance is the oldest and mostly commonly used term globally. In this paper distance education or ODL are used interchangeably. Distance education as a generic term used to define the field while distance learning is a mode of delivering education and instruction, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom (Bozkurt, 2015). Distance learning provides "access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both (Honeyman and Miller, 1993). Butcher (2000) defines distance education as a set of teaching and learning strategies (or education methods) that can be used to overcome spatial and temporal separation between educators and learners. These strategies or methods can be integrated into any education programme and potentially used in any combination with any other teaching and learning strategies in the provision of education (including those strategies which demand that learners and educators be together at the same time and/or place). UNESCO (2003) opined that distance education is any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time form the learner, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print. In distance education, the normal or principal means of communication is through technology. While teachers in conventional system, may adopt technology as a supplement to their teaching. In general, the desire to anchor as much as possible to the train of globalization demands that all sectors of society must be literate and this kind of mass education can only be afforded through the distance-learning scheme. Keegan (2002, p.20) defines distance education as "Teaching and learning in which learning normally occurs in a different place from teaching". Distance education is meant for education to the population which is scattered and has least opportunities for further studies. It has proved very effective mode of education at higher education level nowadays. In this way its weight increases due to increase in the demand of educational opportunity and provision of programs for different groups (Garrison, 1986; 1987; Gaspar & Thompson, 1995). 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" (Perraton, at al., 2001). Distance education has within its purview elements of these terms. Thus, Holmerg (1990) defined distance education as:

The various forms of teaching and learning at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or in the same premises but which nevertheless benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition (i.e. tutoring, teaching) of the staff of the tutorial organization. Its main characteristic is that it relies on noncontiguous, i.e. mediated communication (p. 1).

Distance education can be a part of an open learning system which offers open access to courses, or it can be a part of a structured formal programme. The learner can study at home, at the place of work, or at a host university campus, in learning centers or through a combination of such arrangements. Amundsen and Bernard (1989) mentioned "… the definitive characteristic of distance education is the separation between 'teacher' and learner and among learners…. as a result, interpersonal communication is not a natural characteristic of distance education" (p.7). Gaspar and Thompson (1995) indicate potential of distance education saying that it is amalgamation of print material to educational technology /ICTs. Keegan (1986) talks of its six major features: (a) the separation of teacher and learner, (b) the role of educational organization, (c) the place of technological medium, (d) two-way communication, (e) the separation of the learner and the learning groups, and (f) industrialization. According to Bates (1986) distance education is based on two approaches i.e - structured, pre-programmed learning materials - computer communication functions. When both above approaches are combined the fourth generation of distance education emerges (Lauzon and Moore, 1989) that has no barriers of time and place. The significant difference between distance and conational education is separation of the learner (space and time) during majority of teaching learning activities. Keegan (2002, p.20) discusses how teaching is to a large degree mediated through various technologies and learning generally takes place on an individual basis through supported independent study in the student's home, or work place. The quality of the teaching materials and the level and variety support for independent study depends on the nature and resources of the institution or organization responsible for a given programme, and the available communication infrastructure. Distance education is often also flexible. Formally, educated individuals can also continue their education through this system in which the student and learner are at a distance from one another. They share their activities through correspondence, face-to face contact and through the use of various instructional modes. In distance education system of learning, as the learner and teacher are at a distance from one another, learning materials are usually sent to students by postal services or via the internet. This material should been written in a simple and understandable language. For the guidance of students, necessary diagrams, self-assessment questions and activities are added in the course. It is considered made sure the students understand the material without any external assistance. Distance education (DE) or distance learning (DL) systems are usually adopted for their flexibility and ability to deliver education at economies of scale. The most common factors driving a country to adopt a DL system are: 1) the need to widen access to higher education for the masses, 2) the need to provide continuing formal and non-formal education, 3) the need to train increasing numbers of students in provincial areas that are target zones for socio-economic development within a country, and 4) the need to upgrade primary and

secondary school teachers' qualifications. Therefore, distance education means the delivery of useful learning opportunities at convenient place and time for learners, irrespective of the institution providing the learning opportunity (Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra, 2001). Generally, distance education has four major characteristics as identified by ADEA Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning (2002). These characteristics are: institutional accreditation where learning is certified by an institution or agency; use of variety of media for instructional delivery; provision of two-way communication to ensure tutor-learner, and learner-learner interaction; and possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials for leaner-learner interaction, laboratory or practice session or library study. Distance education not only shares the goals of conventional education, but it also aims at providing access to historically under-served, place bound, and highly motivated population. Distance education is said to be open because of students' freedom and programme flexibility. It is flexible and open in terms of its admission requirements, that is, not as rigid as in conventional institutions, freedom in terms of place of study, time, place, and composition of study programme, content and didactic approach. It is intended to offer useful learning opportunity to recipients at a time and local environment convenient to them. Contacts between the student and institutions are provided through interactive and non-interactive media. It may also be provided through some contact at study centre. Unlike the conventional face-to-face instruction, the delivery medium plays a crucial role in minimizing the gap between teaching and learning (Keegan, 1996).

Historical developments, Promises, Trends, Challenges, and Prospects of ODL

Although Keegan (1990, p. 94) reports that Sewart 'sometimes tries to trace distance education back as far as the epistles of St. Paul' who wrote several letters on how to teach Christians (correspondence teaching), and Willis (1994, p. 5) proposes that 'Itinerant wanderers delivering information by word of mouth were perhaps the world's first distance educators', distance education did not really begin until the rise of industrial society. Open and distance learning (ODL) has developed as a popular form of education since 1840, when Pittman sent his students lessons in shorthand by post (Wallace, 1982). However, the contemporary information technology revolution has ushered in an explosion in ODL growth, particularly since numerous 'conventional institutions have perceived the "sunrise industry" potential of ODL and have set up subdivisions to develop it' (Simpson, 2000, p. 1). By the end of the 19th century, it was well established in the form of correspondence study. Correspondence study basically involves the use of print-based course materials and the postal service. Such one-way technologies all but preclude the creation of public space and interactivity that grounds communicative action to build the life world. The beginnings of correspondence study depended on the emergence of the same factors that contributed to the birth of adult education: adult literacy, the printing press, a publishing industry, mass-produced, low cost pens (Hamilton, 1990), and need—brought on by the demands of the Industrial Revolution for an educated workforce. Bates (1995,2005) as well as Peters(2001) mentioned that distance education had gone through three stages. The first generation of distance education refers to those which mainly utilize written and p*rinted texts*

and postal services for delivering such texts in the forms of books, newspapers, and manuals. It is so-called print-based correspondence education. In this stage, the interaction between teachers and students was usually limited to correspondence, meaning handwritten texts that were sent via postal mail. The second generation is characterized by the use of *radio and television* as instructional media in addition to print materials. This generation is often referred to as the "industrial mode" of distance education with highly specialized division of labor in producing and delivering instructional materials and the potential to educate thousands of students at once. The third generation of distance education utilizes *information and communication technologies* (ICT) to provide interaction in addition to content delivery. There are two aspects of interactivity in the use of ICT: the interactivity between the learner and the content as seen in interactive multimedia learning materials in CD-ROM as well as on the Web and the interactivity between teachers and students and among students. The latter interactivity makes the fourth generation of distance education. It can be also said that there is an emerging generation of distance education where interactivity or two-way communication between teachers and students and among students becomes of utmost importance. In terms of technology, the social media or so called Web 2.0 plays an important part in transforming learning experiences in distance education. In addition, the wide availability of the Open Educational Resources (OER) reduces the burden of content production by distance education institutions and enables them to focus more on learner support and design for learning. Taylor (2001) suggested five generations of distance education: First, the Correspondence Model based on print technology; Second, the Multi-media Model based on print, audio and video technologies; Third, the Tele-learning Model, based on applications of telecommunications technologies to provide opportunities for synchronous communication; Fourth, the Flexible Learning Model based on online delivery via the Internet; and Fifth, Intelligent Flexible Learning Model based on the interactive nature of the Internet. As this model was suggested before social media and Web 2.0 came into scenes, it is understandable that this model does not include the emerging generation of distance education, either, which was discussed above. Criticizing those classifications based on technologies, Anderson and Dron (2010) suggests three generations of distance education in terms of its dominant pedagogy: the cognitive behaviorist pedagogy, the social-constructivist pedagogy, and the connectivist pedagogy of distance education. According to Anderson and Dron, the first generation, the cognitive behaviorist pedagogy, is characterized by the thinking that learning means some behavioral changes instigated by learning stimuli, and was the dominant thinking in computer-assisted instruction and instructional systems designs. The second generation of distance education pedagogy, the social-constructivist pedagogy, was originated in the work of Vygotsky and Dewey, and focuses more on learning instead of teaching. In this pedagogy, human interaction (student-teacher and student-student) is emphasized, which makes it costly for an institution to adopt. The third generation, the connectivist pedagogy of distance education, is built around networked connections and based on the learners' ability to actively participate in networked communities of their choice.

Rationales and Benefits of ODL

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) refers to the provision of **flexible** educational opportunities in terms of **access** and **multiple modes** of knowledge acquisition(Ahmad, Phillips, Santhi & Wahid 2010). **Flexible** means the availability of choices for educational endeavors' anywhere, anytime and anyhow. **Access** means opportunity made available to all, freeing them from constraints of time and place. **Multiple modes** mean the use of various delivery systems and learning resources. The reason ODL becomes popular around the world include: rapid population growth and growing demand for education; need to provide equal access to education; changing nature of typical university student – on job learning for adults; as a strategy for meeting urgent needs in some sectors (e.g teachers); being a more cost effective alternative of providing education; advance in technology – from print, radio, television to multimedia or teleconferencing to computer conferencing or computer networking and audio – and video conferencing etc. ODL provides enormous advantages to learners, governments and employers.

Open and distance learning provides benefits for many major stakeholders:

Benefits for			
Students or learners	institutions	Employers	governments
increased access and flexibility; ability to combine work and education; reduced travel time and costs; more learner-centered approach; relevance to authentic learning needs; enrichment, higher quality and new ways of interaction; acquisition of 21st century skills necessary for the workplace	attracting global underserved populations of potential students; improved teaching quality; support for continuing education; reduced need for bricks and mortar infrastructure.	high quality and usually cost effective professional development in the workplace; reduced travel time and costs; easy, regular upgrading of skills; increased productivity; development of a new learning culture; sharing of costs and training time; increased portability of training	increase capacity and cost-effectiveness of education and training systems; reach target groups with limited access to conventional education and training; reduce gender inequality by allowing women to access higher education through distance learning, while staying at home with their families and in their own countries and communities; ensure the connection of educational institutions and curricula to the emerging networks and information resources; support and enhance the quality and relevance of existing educational structures and programs; promote innovation and

			opportunities for lifelong and life-wide learning

Source: International Council of Open and Distance Educators /ICDE (2013)

Distance vs. Traditional Education: What research says?

"Open" has to be understood against the backdrop of "closed" or "formal," and "distance" against the ideas of "contact" or "face to face." Open learning is a term with no universally agreed definition. To some scholars 'open' will indicate open entry and access to learning opportunities, and the removal of barriers to learning opportunities. To other scholar, 'open' may include aspects of methods and organization, with consequence that 'open learning' may sometimes be substituted by flexible learning. Distance education in most cases shares the concern for openness and flexibility, but definitions tend to focus on the possibility of communication between participants in the learning process across time and/or space, particularly as brought about by old and new technologies. Essentially, ODL does not mean group learning that takes place under the supervision of a teacher in a formal classroom situation. In distance learning the learner and teacher are spatially and temporally separated, and the use of electronic media or educational technology is prevalent. Research indicates that the instructional format itself (e.g., interactive video vs. videotape vs. "live" instructor) has little effect on student achievement as long as the delivery technology is appropriate to the content being offered and all participants have access to the same technology. Other conclusions drawn from this line of research suggest, achievement on various tests administered by course instructors tends to be higher for distant as opposed to traditional students (Souder, 1993), yet no significant difference in positive attitudes toward course material is apparent between distant and traditional education (Martin & Rainey, 1993); conventional instruction is perceived to be better organized and more clearly presented than distance education (Egan, et al., 1991); the organization and reflection needed to effectively teach at a distance often improves an instructor's traditional teaching; future research should focus on the critical factor in determining student achievement: the design of instruction itself (Whittington, 1987). In a review of the state of knowledge in distance education, Hansen et al. (1997) conclude that, with regard to "learner outcomes" distance education is just as effective as traditional education (NCES 2000b); distance learners generally have a more favorable attitude toward distance education than traditional learners, and feel as though they are learning just as much in a distance education mode as they would in a traditional classroom; successful distance education learners tend to be abstract learners who are intrinsically motivated and possess "an internal locus of control"; and each form of distance education technology has its own advantages and disadvantages in contributing to the overall quality of the learning experience. Moreover, the demarcation lines of distance education have caused much discussion. The most lucid and analytic definition has been provided by Keegan (1990, 1998), who identifies five characteristics and differences between distance education and traditional teaching and learning, namely the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face

education); the influence of an educational organization both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student-support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programmes); the use of technical media – print, audio, video or computer – to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course; the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education); and the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes (Keegan, 1990, p. 44)

Misconceptions and Challenges of ODL

Distance learning is rapidly transforming the delivery of education at all levels within developed and developing countries. Key trends associated with its application in the more advanced economies are described including its rapid rates of growth and adoption, the trend towards technology convergence on the Internet, innovations in content creation, and the move towards horizontal integration as a necessary organizational strategy to sustain distance learning systems.
However; there are common concerns and misconceptions about ODL that need to be addressed across different target groups while some concerns and misconceptions are group specific : ODL is inferior to face-to-face education ; ODL is primarily for people who have not 'made the grade' in prior levels of learning ; ODL is a cheap alternative to face – to – face teaching ; available ODL programmes do not cater for (diverse) learning interests/needs ; it is not possible to learn practical/'hard' skills in ODL programmes ; assumptions about 'good' education may be based on prior experience and social myths, rather than grounded insight.
Despite such misconceptions are avoidable by operating well organized and managerial systems, there are problems or challenges that need to be resolved. These problems include the quality of instruction, hidden costs, misuse of technology, and the attitudes of instructors, students, and administrators. Each one of these has an effect on the overall quality of distance learning as a product. In many ways, each of these issues relates to the others.

The low quality of teaching and learning

The explosive growth of both traditional institutions and new providers raises new questions in regard to standards of quality. Quite naturally, "consumers" of education (students, parents, employers) are demanding some kind of certification of institutions and the qualifications they award. Research suggests that the effectiveness of distance learning is based on preparation, the instructor understands of the needs of the students, and an understanding of the target population (Omoregie, 1997). Sherritt (1996) found in her survey of higher education administrators that many of the decision makers view distance programs as second rate, a "necessary but deficient form of education" (pg.2). She writes that this attitude also was found in academic departments that "have no strong mandates to adjust their curriculum and instruction to fit distance learning beyond cursory cooperation" (pg. 2). There are no rewards for doing so and the effort takes away

from research time. Sherrit also cites a study by Caffarella et al. done in 1992, which found off campus instructors to be "a demoralized bunch, perceiving poor working conditions, isolation, personal and professional deprivation" (p.3). This attitude hardly seems conducive to an effective learning environment for the students. If the administration and instructors are lacking in true commitment, it is bound to have a negative influence on the entire distance learning experience.
In general, a chronic shortage of faculty, poor quality teaching, poorly prepared and rigid curricula and pedagogy, lack of accountability and quality assurance mechanisms are contributing poor profile of graduates.

Text-books and learning materials are not in a manner of self study

Textbooks or modules in most courses are generally uninviting. They are usually copies of internet and tend to be theoretical, with a heavy style and pages densely packed with print. School textbooks have been designed mainly to convey information or a syllabus, or to set problems and tests; they have been designed with teachers as the primary audience, telling teachers in detail what to teach. If the design features of self-study materials were used, they could improve the accessibility and interest-level of learning materials for use by individual learners both at a distance and in learning groups at local centres or classrooms. They could also, if appropriately designed, play a role in demonstrating more active learning approaches for learners.

Poor management - It is well known that the core functions of managing an institution are:

planning, organizing, motivating and controlling (Freeman 1997). Teaching is conducted through face-to-face tutorials, course materials in text, audiotapes, video, computing facilities and so on. Hence, the planning, organizing and controlling of the development, production, distribution and use of the various forms of media is a significant part of the task facing administrators in open and distance learning.

Geographical and infrastructural barriers

'Infrastructure' refers to public utilities (power, telecommunications, water supply, sanitation and sewerage), public works (roads, dams and canal work for drainage and irrigation) and other transport sectors (World Bank, 1994, p. 2). The requirement for a minimum level of infrastructure applies equally well to distance education. Materials have to be delivered to learners (by whatever means or media); any medium used has to be accessible and affordable to learners wherever they are; communication with others is needed for interaction, motivation, support or feedback on learning; learners need conditions (light, heat etc.) which allow them to study; organizers and materials developers need facilities which support the production, administration and management of programmes.

Student Concerns and non inclusiveness

Not all students are suited to this type of learning and not all subjects are best taught via this medium. More mature students are the most likely to find success with distance learning. The successful student needs to have a number of characteristics such as tolerance for ambiguity, a need for autonomy, and an ability to be flexible (Threkeld & Brzoska, 1994). Hardy and Boaz (1997) found that "compared to most face-to-face learning environments, distance learning requires students to be more focused, better time managers, and to be able to work independently and with group members" (p.43). Many distance learners are different from traditional undergraduates in that they are already in professions. They have well defined goals and are more motivated (Dibiase, 2000). Distance education students need to feel a part of a community. Greenburg (1998) describes this as a virtual learning community. Students in these communities often feel less pressure to perform individually, and more pressure to collaborate and be part of the team (Kantor, 1998 cited in Greenberg, 1998). Being involved in a collaborative learning process is an important part of forming the foundation of a learning community. When this is not encouraged, participation is generally low and dialog is absent (Palloff & Pratt, 2000). Students also need the attention of the instructors. This may be truer in a distance situation than in a traditional classroom. In a situation where eye contact and proximity are limited, students cannot be disciplined nor affirmed by eye contact and body language (McKnight, 2000). Students may also have a difficult time reading the reactions of the remote location class members. This lack of interaction can cause problems when there is a dissenting opinion that cannot be picked up on with non-verbal cues, and is misperceived as a verbal attack. This type of miscommunication can cause the community problems as the class progresses. It is fair to say that compressed video can magnify the strengths and weaknesses of the instructor. Students are prone to pick up on a lack of organization and direction and respond with apathy and absenteeism (West, 1994).

Attitudes towards Distance Learning

Walcott (1994) cited in Carter (2000) found in a study of adult distance learning that "to effectively bridge the gaps between classroom and distance teaching, faculty need to look at the distance teaching from the students' point of view"(p. 249). The faculty must also be aware of getting instructional materials, handouts, tests, and other class items to both sites simultaneously. It is important for the instructors to develop a sense of community between the sites, achieve maximum participation, and get the participants to buy in to the process. The idea of learning as a collaborative process is very important when students are separated by distance. According to research by Palloff and Pratt (2000), "collaborative learning processes assists students to achieve deeper levels of knowledge generation through the creation of shared goals, shared exploration, and a shared process of meaning making" (p. 6). It is up to the instructor to be aware of this in the distance learning environment and to encourage collaborative learning and a sense of community among the students. Another important consideration for the instructor is their view regarding the goal of distance education. There are two main thoughts on this. Schlosser and Anderson (1994, cited in Imel, 1998) put this thought forward in a review of distance education

literature. They submit that the goal of distance education in the United States is "to offer the distance student an experience as much like that of traditional, face-to-face instruction as possible" (pg. 3). This would mean that distance learning pedagogy would not differ much from that used in an ordinary classroom. Bates (1995) has a different idea. He suggests that instead of using technology to replicate traditional methods, it should be used to improve instruction. Holmberg (1989) also discusses these two schools of thought and concludes that distance education as a mode of education in its own right has very different consequences (than viewing it as a substitute for face-to-face instruction). The instructor must decide which attitude they will adopt because it has a profound impact on their approach to instruction. Instructors also have adaptations they need to make to the technology. An instructor used to visual cues may find it difficult to adapt to a situation such as compressed video. The students at the remote site are not always in clear view of the instructor. West (1994) calls adapting to the lack of visual cues a major adaptation for the instructor. Part of this can be alleviated by good communication with the technician, but as we have seen earlier, that communication is not always present. McKnight (2000) contends that proximity and eye contact are important factors in education that are limited in the distance learning environment. She says that we inherently recognize the connection these provide, but in the distance learning environment they are "both severely and sometimes permanently compromised" (pg. 2). She asserts that professors are unable to observe the emotions of the students and cannot detect "moments of anxiety," thereby limiting their ability to respond to student needs. This puts a burden on the instructor and causes the students to respond differently than they might in a traditional classroom setting.

Issues of Cost Effectiveness

Are distance learning programs actually cost efficient? Distance education has the potential to reach large numbers of people irrespective of their locations, age, statutes, or background but Implementing ODL are associated with significant challenges. Foremost among the problems is the lack of financial resources. Resources available for knowledge development are not evenly distributed. Open and distance learning programme requires a huge amount of money to start the operation and regular investments in the development and revision of course materials. Lack of resources in developing countries is obvious and becomes more acute as demographic trends increase the need to expand education provision. Open and distance learning programme rely heavily on technology, this make it imperative for initial heavy financial resources for the acquisition of equipment such as computers television and radio transmitter as well as for the training and re-training of personnel, so also money will be needed for maintenance and operating cost. Huge amount of money is also needed to provide support services to students by a trained and experienced student's counselor who is expected to monitor, correct and give them the necessary support to make their studies interesting. A study by Phelps et al. (1991) found that "the potential cost-effectiveness of using online technologies in distance education is still uncertain" (pg. 303). The study further showed that the concepts of costs and effectiveness are not as simple as they first appear. Atkinson (1983, cited in Ng, 2000) notes, "it is possible for a

program to be efficient but not cost effective if the outputs which are actually produced do not contribute to the program objectives: that is it may be efficient at doing the wrong things" (pg. 306). Ng also comments on the cost of human capital. He states, "Human capital and the costs of conversion are expenses that can easily be underestimated" (pg. 306). Ng notes that the cost of online courses is affected by how they are implemented: as an enhancement or as the primary teaching medium. If it is implemented as a primary teaching medium, it is considerably more expensive. The teaching purpose of the different approaches needs to be taken into account. If this is not factored in by administration, there may be costs that are not apparent at first glance.

Trends, Promises and prospects of ODL

Open and distance learning (ODL) has become an accepted and indispensable part of education systems around the world, in both developed and developing countries, and especially for the latter. Hence, ODL is becoming an accepted and indispensable part of mainstream education prompted by the need to make learning more accessible to a wider population, the growing need for continual skills upgrading and reskilling; and advances in technology that have made it possible for teaching to be conducted at a distance. Governments are cognizant of the potential of ODL in fulfilling the fundamental rights of all people to learning and the need to incorporate it within the framework of human capital development. Advances in the information and communication technology (ICT) have opened up new possibilities and opportunities in ODL. The increasing number of open universities being established across the world is highly indicative of this trend. Similarly, more and more traditional universities are transforming from single mode to dual mode universities, recognizing the importance of distance education in providing greater accessibility and up-to-date educational resources.

In a nutshell; globally, ODL is considered as an important new approach in attempting to resolve the problems of access, quality and equity. The growth in interest in ODL has been driven by several factors – technological advances that have allowed for more and more subjects to be taught at a distance - new opportunities with regard to access and delivery systems abound with the development of technology – such as the miniaturizing of equipment, the reduction in costs, and an increase in user flexibility, portability and integration. Internet access has grown quickly and in recent years, the worldwide need for ongoing skills upgrading and retraining. Also, Distance education systems are generally thought to be more cost efficient than traditional face−to−face education. Costs can be spread over large numbers, lowering the cost per student

Rapid population growth, increasing demand for higher education and inability to accommodate via traditional or formal schooling, growth of industrialization and demand for new skills, flexibility in entry and exit as well as instruction and testing, Learner autonomy which means flexibility in the time and place of learning, as well as in the speed or pacing of learning, **c**ontemporary advancements in technology potentially impacting the nature of knowledge; the process of teaching and learning; and the social organization of teaching and learning in higher education.

ODL in Africa, Ethiopia

Africa faces huge socio-economic challenges. Moreover, there is an increasing recognition and acceptance that education may be the only way to ensure sustainability of communities and nations as healthy, vibrant and functioning societies and democracies, and for individuals to escape from the viciousness of poverty (Dhanarajan 200). The good news is that there are many Successful ODL programmes across the continent and there are efforts underway aimed at addressing the challenges of development. The higher education landscape of the 21st century is significantly different from that of previous centuries. There are more entrants to higher education today than at any time in the past. Higher education in Africa has, in fact, evolved from an elitist pursuit into a mass system. The pressure of numbers is one thing that traditional institutions are not equipped to cope with. Their capacities can never be raised to respond to the ever-increasing demand. The only alternative is the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system (Kanwar 2008). Ethiopia's population has been increasing dramatically over the last successive years, and stands at over 94 million. This has been the most problematic issue in terms of human resource development, with most having extremely limited access to higher education systems. Most conventional tertiary education systems in these countries do not have the capacity to provide secondary, tertiary and life-long education to the whole population owing to demographic, economic, social such as gender, and geographical factors. Very few of the existing conventional face-to-face tertiary institutions in Ethiopia can claim a critical mass of properly qualified faculty. On the other hand, the demand for education, especially for higher and continuing non-formal education is significant and needs to be accommodated. Distance education opens up the potential for most Ethiopian youth to address these problems. But, the feasibility of distance education in any country depends on the circumstances in which it operates. Some of the infrastructure which industrialized countries takes for granted can be lacking in less developed countries and significantly hamper the operation of a distance learning system. The country's infrastructure limits the options available, making difficult or slow some of the operations essential for effective distance education, and limiting the possibilities for interaction. There are also entrenched attitudes to overcome in policy-makers, academics, materials developers and learners, as in any country. There is a lack of indigenous experience and expertise in using open and distance learning and at present little access to international literature, training manuals and sample materials from other countries. Also, developing and sustaining distance learning systems will require investment in new skills and knowledge for learners, technical support staff, teachers and instructors, administrators, and policy and decision makers

Summary

Today, global wealth is concentrated less and less in factories, land, tools, and machinery but the knowledge, skills, and resourcefulness of people are increasingly critical to the world economy (World Bank, 2000) where higher learning institutions stand forefront. As a force contributing to social and economic development, open and distance learning has grown and has been accepted

as an indispensable part of the mainstream of educational system globally. Distance education involves the use both for presentation of information and for, communication between participants of a range of media, such as print, written correspondence; audio, video and computer based media and networks as well as multimedia facilities. The rationale for distance education from its inception has been to provide equal opportunities for learners to study without any barriers whatsoever. The open nature of education mediated by electronic technologies has been formally institutionalized in open policies of admissions, freedom of selection what to learn, where and when to learn. The openness of distance education is also seen in relatively flexible organization structures, delivery and communication pattern and the use of various technologies to support learning. The growth of ODL was stimulated in part by the interest among educators and trainers in the use of new technological-based method of teaching (i.e. the use of internet, multi-media, micro-fiche etc), and also by the recognition that the traditional/conventional way of education needs adjustment/support by innovative methods. Two main factors have led people to be more interested in distance education; the government call for regular improvement in workers skills, workers re-training, and the technological development that have made it possible to teach more subjects and students at a distance. It is more than ever clear that open and distance learning will be an important element of future education and training systems. It is approaching acceptance within mainstream education and training in such a way that it will make up part of the repertoire of most educational institutions in the future. *For the student/learner* open and distance learning means increased access and flexibility as well as the combination of work and education. It may also mean a more learner-centered approach, enrichment, higher quality and new ways of interaction. *For employers* it offers high quality and usually cost effective professional development in the workplace. It allows upgrading of skills, increased productivity and development of a new learning culture. In addition, it means sharing of costs, of training time, and increased portability of training. *For governments* the main potential is to increase the capacity and cost effectiveness of education and training systems, to reach target groups with limited access to conventional education and training, to support and enhance the quality and relevance of existing educational structures, to ensure the connection of educational institutions and curricula to the emerging networks and information resources, and to promote innovation and opportunities for lifelong learning. What may we conclude from the promises and problems of distance learning? Are there possibilities for improvement in the future? The technology will undoubtedly keep improving and the price will drop, as technology is prone to do once it comes into general use. Already we see improvement in the delivery systems of compressed video and computer assisted instruction. Despite student problems with distance learning, studies indicate they are relatively satisfied with what they are receiving. Despite the need for improvement, the future of distance learning seems bright. Increasing numbers of students enrolling in distance learning classes underscore the need for "comprehensive and thoughtful evolution of distance education if it is to become the educational model of the future" (Harnar, et al., 2000, pg. 37). Despite the cost, coordination, and training that must be put into a program, it has "great potential to deliver and receive educational

programs to and from remote sites" (Weber, 1996, pg. 219). Perhaps Keegan (1995) puts it best when he says "the challenge is to design cost-effective and educationally-effective systems for use in the years to come that permit for the first time in history (electronic) teaching of students face-to-face at a distance" (pg. 53).

Notwithstanding the above challenges, it is my contention that a well managed ODL has the potential to broaden access with success to higher education especially for the previously disadvantage individuals who might not have had the opportunity to access higher education and by extension, acquire tertiary qualifications through traditional, full-time, campus-based contact study. This potential can as well apply to young school leavers who are excluded from full-time contact institutions because they might not possess a matriculation exemption or lack sufficient points required for automatic admission to universities of their choice. But It takes the position that provision of learner services is one of the key ways in which those engaged in distance teaching can demonstrate a commitment to learner-centeredness in order to become more competitive and better positioned strategically to serve the pressing demand for high-quality, accessible education and training.

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