

**RETHINKING OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING
FOR DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

Keynote Address

Delivered by

**Professor Michael Omolewa, FCOL, OON
Nigeria's Ambassador/Permanent Delegate to
UNESCO, Paris, FRANCE.**

E-mail: m.omolewa@unesco.org

At the

**2nd African Council of Distance Education (ACDE)
Conference and General Assembly
National Open University of Nigeria
Lagos, Nigeria,
8 - 11 July 2008.**

I want to thank the Vice Chancellor of the National Open University of Nigeria, the Local Organising Committee, the entire executive members of the 2nd African Council of Distance Education, and all those who have given me this honour to deliver the Keynote address at this 2nd ACDE Conference and General Assembly. I am particularly grateful to the authorities who planned this programme for giving me an open cheque to choose a topic for my presentation. My choice was influenced by a desire to challenge the minds of the participants, all of whom are celebrated experts and specialists in the ever expanding field of Open and Distance Learning (ODL).

Open and distance learning (ODL) has been correctly identified as a panacea for the myriad of problems in educational systems in Africa. For one thing, it is inclusive and free of restrictions imposed by distance and space. Moreover, it creates opportunities for those excluded from formal education because of their gender, age or status. ODL makes education accessible to those who are unable to study full time due to their social responsibilities and commitments.

Open and distance learning is most relevant in places where access to learning is limited at various levels. And, perhaps, no other region in the

world needs more urgent access to training, retraining and further training than Africa. Indeed all reports currently indicate that Africa is far behind all other regions of the world at all levels of educational development. This situation will continue to adversely affect the continent's human resource development, and make it less competitive, less resourceful and ill-equipped to assert itself in the global community. All these issues demand that education in Africa must be stepped up if the continent is to realise its potentials. Presently, Africa is behind on a number of areas, for example, it is not on target meet many of the development goals set up by the international community.

The challenges of the Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) underscore the need to tackle the problem of poverty, gender discrimination, poor governance, economic and social insecurity, fuelled by interethnic and inter-religious strife, poor working conditions and the continuing exploitation of the natural and human resources of Africa.

The Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), identify human development as a key to social and economic progress. In acknowledgment of this, international organizations,

governments and private sector groups have all coordinated their development work around the MDGs. The eight MDGs aim to cut extreme poverty by half, ensure every child has the chance to go to school and live a long and healthy life, bring discrimination against women to an end, reduce the risks of dying as a result of childbirth, control deadly diseases, manage the environment better and share the benefits of progress more equally among all the nations of the world. The deadline for these is 2015 but from all indications, Africa is not on target on any of the goals. Consequently, it is imperative that the continent wakes up and exploits the opportunities that ODL offers. But to do so, Africa must confront a number of issues decisively.

To start with, Africa has to fully recognise that open and distance learning is technology driven, and that the delivery mode has always been guided by literacy skills, communication technologies such as radio and television, and increasingly now by the internet. How can Africa cope with the issue of access to relevant information and communication technologies? How can the continent deal with the high cost of the computer, which makes its ownership almost impossible, the frustrating slow speed of access to the internet, and the lack of a conducive learning environment in cybercafés?

Another critical issue in ODL is the role of instructors and facilitators. It is important for the staff at the Open and Distance Learning institutions to win the respect of the traditional teaching establishment through a rigorous system of recruitment. The staff of the institutions must not be seen to be manipulating or choosing to serve because they have been rejected by the conventional institutions. Rather they must be those who are committed to defend open and distance learning, with self-confidence and conviction. They must ensure that their products are outstanding and able to contribute to the wider community that will appreciate their value. This means that the ODL must build into its system quality assurance strategy in the management and administration of ODL. It also means that student support must be provided to encourage the learner to enrol and remain on the programmes.

The issue of student population must also be carefully examined, especially as the number of learners is on the increase. It is, perhaps, necessary to point out that size should not be a driving force as small can be beautiful. What is important is that the learner must be equipped with resources and high quality teaching materials. This is particularly critical for the face to face component of ODL. I am sure that some of us will recall the days when university libraries provided students carrel in the library, and reading rooms

in halls of residence. At the time, also, there was an almost inflexible policy of careful staff and student recruitment to guarantee that only the best personnel was made available for the learning community. It is true of course that such a policy if applied to the ODL may be self-defeating and that the process may restrict the open nature of the ODL. Furthermore, it may lead to the limitation of access to those who see the ODL as the last hope for those struggling against exclusion, and segregation in educational provision. Indeed the issue of exclusion in education has become topical, and even some activists see access to learning as a fundamental human right. Thus, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 in the United States has been commended. (Osgood, 2005)

In view of these issues, it is imperative that ODL in Africa is designed to focus on the preparation, evaluation and delivery of courses and programmes that meet the goals of development in the region.

I would recommend that those in the ODL business must never look back, or doubt their relevance, vision and mission. They must always remember that all good things face stiff opposition, discouragement and sometimes even the temptation to quit. Those who have triumphed over the test, trial and tribulation often have a success story to tell. I would also recommend that

ODL should learn on the past experience of its uses. For example it must include access to the learners in prison, and learn from the lessons provided by the education received in prison by Nelson Mandela, his prison inmates at the Robben Island and similar experiences throughout the world.

The point has to be made that ODL programmes do not necessarily have to lead to the award of degrees. We should remind ourselves that traditional education in Africa did not provide for the “one-shot” achievement through competitive examinations but made provision for life-long learning. This was why as Head of the Department of Adult Education at the University of Ibadan in 1988 I had to change the nomenclature of the programme which I was inaugurating at the time from external degree to external studies to reflect its emphasis on lifelong learning.

Within the context of lifelong learning, one can mount several programmes, develop courses and launch study programmes in subjects that are of immediate and long-term interests of Africa. These should include the cultivation of the attitude of tolerance and respect for differences, cultural diversity, learning to live together, heritage conservation, promotion, and protection. All these courses and programmes will make ODL relevant,

exciting and refreshing. It will certainly also integrate ODL into social and economic development.

Key actors in ODL must not lose sight of its capacity to prepare the present and future generations to live an active and fulfilled life. Perhaps I need to illustrate this with concrete examples from the life of Josiah Soyemi Ogunlesi, a Nigerian and first university graduate of History in Africa. Although the number of products of the ODL was small at the time, the system was able to make an important and effective contribution to social and political development of Africa.

Ogunlesi was a classroom teacher from Sagamu, the present day Ogun State of Nigeria, when he learnt that Emmanuel Odukoya Ajayi, a fellow Nigerian in St. Andrews College Oyo, was acquiring qualifications from the University of London by distance learning. At the time, distance learning took the form of correspondence course. Ogunlesi enrolled for tuition courses and began to study history which he passed at the London Matriculation and Intermediate degree levels. In 1930 he enrolled for the final degree examination in history which he passed. He thereafter was employed as a graduate teacher in history. He also served as a librarian at the Grammar School where he taught. He worked briefly as editor of the *Daily*

Times of Nigeria. In 1946, became a Mass Education Officer when Mass Education programme was introduced in Nigeria. He was responsible for the promotion of mass education in the old Western Region of Nigeria, the task which he took with industry and diligence. At the same time, he was appointed as an examiner for Yoruba by the University of London External Examinations Board. Ogunlesi was a prolific writer, a man of courage and sensitivity. He received several awards and commendations for excellence before he died in 1981. (Omolewa, 1989).

The point being made here is how ODL prepared and equipped him for a variety of roles and responsibilities. Ogunlesi's last job was as an adult educator and that was when he was well over 40 years old and after he had tried his hands at all sorts of jobs. Yet today most people remember him as an adult educator and to many students of open and distance learning, Ogunlesi is the father of open and distance learning in Nigeria. The truth of the matter is that Ogunlesi was an adult educator throughout his working life.

Ogunlesi had shown the value of devotion to a cause, the attractions of zeal, commitment and dedication. Like the most successful adult educators in history, Moses Michael Coady (1882- 1959) of Nova Scotia, Albert

Mansbridge, (1876 – 1952) of England, and Nicolaj Fredrik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1972) of Denmark, Ogunlesi was chosen by open and distance learning. He simply stumbled on the job. He could thereafter declare like his colleagues, “Then, I, liking the work, chose open and distance learning”.

Ogunlesi’s work has informed the theory and practice of open and distance learning and has enriched the philosophy, psychology and history of the subject. Ogunlesi’s life has inspired open and distance learning educators and has been a manifestation of the potentials of vision and drive. Open and Distance Learning instructors can confidently claim that their work has been made lighter and easier by the foundation laid by Josiah Soyemi Ogunlesi. What is now needed is to rekindle the spirit of Ogunlesi in open and distance learning work in Africa. For Ogunlesi was firmly convinced that no meaningful development could take place in the absence of a vigorous open and distance learning work.

First, he believed in self-effort, initiative and sacrifice. He refused to succumb to disappointment or frustration. His self-education career began in 1928 when he became aware that his limited finances could not provide him with higher education after he had passed out of St. Andrew’s College,

Oyo, 1925. His uncle had also disappointed him when he failed to honour an earlier promise to send him to England to study law. Ogunlesi had responded to the disappointment by paying five guineas (which was a substantial proportion of his earnings) to the University Correspondence College on February 13, 1928 for a comprehensive home-study programme. In the process, he suspended his marriage plans, disciplined his mind, and made a judicious use of his time and energy in the pursuit of excellence in learning. In June 1933 he became the first West African to pass the University of London's honours degree examination in history. His achievement was acknowledged as illustrated by a letter from Mr. E.M.E. Agbebi, a well known legal practitioner: 'It is a fine achievement and in history too which is my favourite subject. I hope you will not rest on your oars (or shall I say laurels?) but continue your studies and read up for the M.A. at the earlier convenience.'

This was a demonstration of the possibilities of a motivated adult, the use of distance education and the value of an external degree programme. Throughout the rest of his life, Ogunlesi sought to bring education to those denied access to the formal school system. Thus he tried his hands at establishing the City Correspondence College in partnership with Mr. (later Justice) G.B.A. Coker. After his retirement, he continued to provide tuition

to those who had failed the G.C.E. and the School Certificate Examinations, in the firm belief that educational achievement was possible for anyone committed to it. He did not waste his energy at criticizing government or apportioning blame. He simply acted, and filled the vacuum left by anybody or agency that failed to perform.

It is clear that if the Ogunlesi spirit was sustained, the National Open University would not have been suspended as it was in 1984; school fees would not have been introduced to rob children of the poor access to education in the areas where the tradition of free education had taken root; open and distance learning budget would have been increased and open and distance learning programmes expanded. The current unhealthy assumption that adult education is synonymous with literacy would not have been encouraged. For Ogunlesi was convinced that literacy, vital as it is, is only the beginning of the long journey in education, and that further education is most vital in the educational ladder, because half education is as dangerous as no education.

The Ogunlesi spirit would have insisted on the implementation of the National Mass Literacy Campaign which is now stalled. For Ogunlesi consistently advised that, “Made literate and constantly supplied with

suitable follow-up literature, the ordinary citizen will grow in mind, increase in efficiency in his work, produce more and consume more, take an active and intelligent interest in his country's affairs, and improve generally." Indeed, the Ogunlesi spirit was unequivocally in support of the education of the totality of the adult population. It was opposed to selective approach which ignored the poor and the women. In his own words, 'Nigeria belongs to the illiterate adult. It is he who pays the tax; who decides and provides for the town, who determines the type of house the family shall live in; who votes and elects who shall be the member of parliament. It is the illiterate wife who bears the child; she and her illiterate husband bring up the child who is likely to become prime minister, doctor, engineer, lawyer, technician, accountant, bishop, teacher, etc.'

Ogunlesi believed in both paid-for contribution and voluntarism in open and distance learning. Before he took up a paid job in adult education in 1947, he had been a volunteer for 24 years. He was firm in his conviction that 'A Nigerian who gives his services as an instructor is a nation builder' and that if we liberate this vast majority and encourage them to take an intelligent interest in the economic, social, cultural and political affairs of Nigeria, the country would be changed for good as 'corruption, bribery, disease and their

other bed-fellows will be dealt their death blow as they will be attacked from all sides.’

Ogunlesi demonstrated his commitment to ODL in the different roles he played in his life. He performed each creditably and distinguished himself. It was for this reason that he was in 1981 awarded the highest honour for excellent contribution to adult education by the Nigerian National Council for Adult Education and was listed in the International Biography for Adult Education.

Ogunlesi left behind an example of devotion to scholarship, an insatiable appetite for learning and an irresistible attachment to the principle of continuing and life-long education. He was a lifelong learner, an author, an avid reader, and a meticulous record keeper. He studied until his death. This open and distance learning educator was still working on his autobiography when he answered the call of his Master.

It is obvious that ODL is capable of preparing and equipping learners for a variety and multiplicity of employment and roles due to its emphasis on discipline of self-directed learning and independent thinking.

To build and expand on the foundation that Ogunlesi laid, the funding of ODL must be taken seriously as studies have established a correlation between the levels of funding and the quality and the effectiveness of an educational institution. ODL institutions can be capital intensive projects dealing with the installation of technological gadgets, selective policies in staff and student recruitment and retention and a sustainable mechanism for students support. In order to preserve and protect the quality of the products of ODL, adequate investment must be made to the institutions. The improvement of course materials calls for an increase in financial commitment and resource allocation. ODL must also take advantage of the offerings of the New Technology in learning, and that would require a rethinking in the level of funding of programmes.

We have made the point that ODL remains a key to the effective performance of our educational provision in Africa. We have also made the point that the ODL is an effective tool that can assist in the educational delivery in the region. We have drawn attention to the value of ODL, and used a case study to clearly illustrate the point that investment in ODL is a fruitful and most rewarding one. Finally, we have made the point that it is imperative for ODL process in Africa to carefully re-examine itself with respect to the quality of provision including the materials and students

support, its relevance and sustainability. ODL must therefore address all levels of the educational system and support human resource development for as the Commission for Africa has recently put it:

The shortage of skilled professionals in Africa is a critical issue. It has its roots in a tertiary education system that is in a state of crisis. The emphasis in Africa in recent years has rightly been on the need for primary education. An unfortunate side-effect of this has been the neglect of secondary and tertiary education from which are produced the doctors, nurses, teachers, police officers, lawyers and government workers of tomorrow. Africa's universities ought to be the breeding ground for the skilled individuals whom the continent needs.

There is currently considerable request for access to the open and distance learning space in Africa. There is therefore a vigorous advertisement in the region to the potential learners to enrol and earn degrees, studying at home. The target population is told that it can have degrees within sometimes a ridiculous length of time for studies. There is also increasing concern about cross border education, where the providers of education in Africa are not usually subject to the educational stipulation, and requirements of the nations. And yet no nation can afford to entrust the job market and its human resource development to qualifications of products that have been

fashioned without consideration to the human resource directives and quality enhancement mechanism.

We suggested thereafter that ODL should be adequately funded and eminently recognized by all. This would represent our rethinking of the past strategy of access to learning with its continued relevance and appropriateness for modern day practice.

I wish you well in your deliberations, and I am sure that the entire world would be looking forward to your recommendations and plan of action that will assist Africa move forward in this new millennium.

I thank you, and God bless you

REFERENCES

- Commonwealth Secretariat (2007). Commonwealth Education Partnerships, London, Nexus Strategic Partnerships.
- Ogunlesi, J.S. (1946). *Ilera Ni Ogun Oro*, Lagos, Ife Olu Printing Work.
- (1948). *Ni Ale Ojo Kan: Die Ninu Awon Itan Ile Wa*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson.
- (1954). *Iwe Kika Fun Awon Agba*, Ibadan, Ministry of Education.
- (1954). *E je ki a se Arithmetic*, London, Longman, Green and Co.
- (Co-author, 1954). *English For Africans*, London, Ginn and Co.
- (1955). *Mass Education and the citizen*, Ibadan, Abiodun Printing Works.
- Mood, T. A. (1995). *Distance Education: An Annotated Bibliography*, Englewood , Colorado.
- Omolewa, M. et al., (1989). *J. S. Ogunlesi, 1902-1981*. Ibadan, Ibadan University Press).
- (1981). *Adult Education Practice in Nigeria*, Ibadan, Evans Brothers.
- (1983). 'The Contribution of Mr. Josiah Soyemi Ogunlesi (1902-1981) to Adult Education in Nigeria' *Education and Development*, Vol. 3. No.1, January, pp. 120-129.
- (1985). Ogunlesi, Josiah Soyemi (1902-1981) in J.E. Thomas and Batty Elsey, eds., *International Biography of Adult Education*, University of Nottingham, Department of Adult Education, pp. 468 – 469.
- Osgood, Robert L. (2005). *The History of Inclusion in the United States*, Washington DC, Gallaudet University Press.

UNESCO (2003 – 2007). Global Monitoring Reports. Paris.