Introduction
Over the last 10 to 50 years most of Africa has traversed a journey from being entirely rural to semi-urban/urban- a significant development one needs to take note of. The situation thus in these ensuing years has seen predominantly agro-based economies with a broad base comprised of mostly women and children and a few elite at the apex. This scenario has changed, for better or worse, but has seen many countries trying to become industrialized. While the agricultural and industrial revolutions meant more of physical power as an economic commodity, our new era has seen a new and emerging reality of knowledge as the new economic good. In the same vein, a World Bank research in 2000 asserted that “the quality of knowledge generated within higher education institutions and its availability is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness.” Thus, higher education becomes the pinnacle of development. Physical power, though still necessary, however becomes obsolete.

Most African universities, merely 2 in 1960 to over 160 to date, have retained significant numbers of African professionals to represent more than 60% of the total staff at higher education institutions. This scenario has seen rigorous transformation in education with primary ministries of education providing basic education. Today, more than ever, there is both a dearth of professionals and an excess of knowledge that need to be tapped. Africa, one of the poorest continents with poverty datum lines well below the standard, with high infant mortality rates, high prevalence of the HIV and AIDS, pandemic struggles to keep pace with the ever-changing face of the global village has a mammoth task of providing relevant and sufficient education to its populace. While on the one hand there is technological revolution there is a substantial challenge of resources to provide even the basic needs to a general populace. The point in question is the

---

provision of relevant education especially at higher levels that can transform the fortunes of Africa. As Ashby (1966:3) states “an institution is the embodiment of an ideal. In order to survive, an institution must fulfill two conditions: it must be sufficiently stable to sustain the ideal which gave it birth and sufficiently responsive to remain relevant to the society which supports it.”2 With a myriad of challenges all aggravating extreme poverty and high death rates, higher education becomes the salvation gap for Africa.

Research has shown that institutions of higher education have not successfully provided the professionals required for full national development. On the one hand there is the cancerous brain drain that has affected most African countries in more than twenty years now and on the other hand the output from higher education institutions has been affected by negligence and lack of government support. Now, more than ever, there is a knowledge revolution that has seen great demand for professionals and a creation of many universities and other higher education institutions. This presentation is both a diagnosis of the current education trends in Africa with the subsequent challenges to African national development(s) as well as a way forward (prescription) for development. The principal role of universities is narrowed down to creation of knowledge, dissemination of that knowledge for the benefit of the community and community development. By and large, many contact universities are weighed down by a number of draw back factors such as lack of financing from the government, poor infrastructure due to low per capita incomes in developing nations and lack of ownership by local communities. It is sad to note that universities and other higher education institutions are regarded by the general populace as “Frankenstein;” that is socially constructed monsters that control the people. In this regard the value of higher education has not been a priority for many countries that preferred primary production.

To a large extent though, universities were opened with a view to redress gross illiteracy and raise the social status of many citizens. With normal market forces at play there is stiff and rigorous competition to enter these universities thus disadvantaging many

---

potential national developers of higher education. To that end a new trend of education has gripped the modern period, education modes and approaches have shifted to open and distance learning with innumerable merits to the new modes.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

As a concept, ODL can be defined through many approaches: the absence of a teacher, use of mixed media courseware, use of industrialized processes, correspondence, independent and home study as the key aspects. The Common Wealth of Learning distinguishes ODL into various categories all in sum comprising the mode of delivery and learning. It is a learner-centered type of education; open learning with a wide range of choices to the learner; open access without restricted formal entry requirements and entrance examinations; flexible learning, distributed learning and of paramount importance ODL falls along the continuum of time and the continuum of place. With this in mind many governments, including Zimbabwe adopted this mode of learning and here I will show the circumstances within which we adopted this mode. I intend to show ODL’s contribution to the level of education in Zimbabwe.

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) case

The ZOU is the sole ODL institution of higher learning in Zimbabwe, twenty-seven years after independence. It was a culmination of research into the needs of the nation, needs of the economy and a clear sign of creativity by the stakeholders to provide an institution flexible enough to cater for the broad human resource needs especially at the dawn of the knowledge era. A brief historical perspective of the education system that culminated into this ODL institution will do.

At the Zimbabwean independence in 1980, the government adopted a very deliberate policy to educate all in order to address pre-independence inequalities in educational opportunities, social strata imbalances as well as the manpower needs and development of the country after the war. Two ministries were created: Education and Culture and

---

3 www.col.org/resources/startupguides/intro_learning.htm
Higher and Tertiary Education. The overarching goal for the government was an education system that would address the socio-economic needs of the country. Obviously, university education would play a pivotal role in realizing and achieving these goals and objectives. As was expected, the then sole University of Rhodesia was transformed into the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). Inevitably demand was high for qualified personnel and the University of Zimbabwe could not cope with that scale of demand for university education.

It took several consultations, meetings and deliberations by several stakeholders with enthusiasm expressed and recommendations made for extensive government support for another university and how it would cater for the high demand. From the set commissions – especially the Williams Commission of 1981 and the University of Zimbabwe Feasibility Study of 1986 deliberations gave rise to the National University of Science and Technology. By 1994, a committee was set up to investigate the modalities of the further development of a university for distance education. This was necessitated by the availability of a considerable percentage of the workforce already working yet needing retooling and upgrading to meet the ever-changing socio-economic environment. There was too little time to engage in full time contact university studies; therefore ODL became the next best option to provide a continuing education facility for the adult population. A Center for Distance Education under the Faculty of Education at the University of Zimbabwe was formed with a primary mandate to upgrade the qualifications of schoolteachers who had diplomas in education. From these humble beginnings is embedded the fate of our ZOU. It sounds well to speak of this institution today but it is always good to remember that the ZOU is a creation of need, a sign of creativity and innovation. Very briefly, here are the major turning points of the ZOU from its birth to date.

- 1993 Center for Distance Education (CDE) at the UZ under the Faculty of Education was offering B.Ed degree with a student population of 749 students.
- 1996 Center for Distance Education becomes the University College of Distance Education (UCDE), a college of the University of Zimbabwe: more
programmes on offer in Agriculture, Mathematics and English and Communications and the college gets popular. Student numbers rise to 3429.

- 1997  the student population has gone up to 5429.
- 1999 March 1st By an Act of Parliament the UCDE became the Zimbabwe Open University. Student numbers are 14 313.
- 2005  Students are 18 701 and 2006 students are 21 500.
- Overview: from a single B.Ed degree in 1993, the ZOU now offers 23-degree programmes to date with 19 at undergraduate level, three diplomas and two Masters programmes and three post-graduate diplomas.

The university has grown thus far because Open and Distance Learning as a mode per se has become itself a penetrating instrument in our era and a relevant tool for attaining higher education. The total number of graduates to date is well above 14 000 in the seven years if its existence. Almost every sector of the economy has had graduates from the Zimbabwe Open University. Today we boast of twenty-three inter-disciplinary and inter faculty degree programmes with great popularity in education and commerce. Thus far, our contribution to development and the education system is immense.

**ODL as a Strategy for National Development**

At the core of the Millennium Development Goals is the drive to achieve development. Yet, development per se is not defined in the MDG document, it is inferred. Reducing abject poverty, providing education for all, ensuring health to all are particular objectives to a broader goal – development. Hence, probably as Amartya Sen suggests in his book *Development as Freedom*, development is obviously an intrinsic nature of human freedoms. But development is a process – a process of processes. The question is “how do we achieve development? To Amartya Sen “freedoms are not only primarily ends of development [but] are also among its principal means” (Sen 11). Precisely, development has many far-reaching implications. In a world where levels of consciousness are rising, both need and greed have created multiple identities. We have, in this century more than the last, more refugees, destitutes, street families, more poor and helpless people. These
are all socially constructed realities and need not have been. They need not be. Hence education will play a very crucial role in addressing these societal anomalies.

In Neo-Platonic philosophy, a segment of modern philosophy there is a doctrine of “salvation” propagated by Plotinus. A fine scholar whose doctrine has nothing directly to do with Christianity per se, but has something to offer which I think is a pedestal for development today. To Plotinus, salvation is a union with the One through knowledge. When one has attained the highest knowledge (ideas) there is a union with the One, whose sole activity, as philosophy suggests, is to think and contemplate the highest ideas. The point in question here is the initiative of humans to attain the union through education and knowledge acquisition. Education is the ladder on which we need to climb to attain higher education. I suggest therefore today that higher education, and especially through the ODL mode, is a handmaid of development. But where do we begin? In a speech at a the Namibian Conference on Open Learning, Sir John Daniel (August 2005) of COL had this to say, “human learning is the most effective mechanism for development. Education also improves the quality of our lives by helping us develop our abilities…education is liberating both individually and socially.”

Education will not achieve its goals in national development if there is no participation by all stakeholders. As we might all be aware conventional universities, in as much as they still serve their purpose of creating knowledge and disseminating it, they fall short in terms of meeting the ever-growing demands for national development and progress. There are distinct advantages of ODL that I will highlight as key to how higher education contributes to national education systems.

Open and Distance Learning is a penetrating tool for social, economic and political liberation especially for Africa today. Development can be measured by the levels of literacy in a country; the level of technological advancement; the level of retention of

---

4 To Modern Philosophy, the term God is not used but an Aristotelian Unmoved Mover is here referred to as the One. The principal activity of the One is thinking about self and higher principles.
5 [www.col.org/speeches/JD_0508NOLNET.htm](http://www.col.org/speeches/JD_0508NOLNET.htm)
professionals in all sectors of the economy and the conquest over diseases. Needless to say, Open and Distance Learning strengthens the human resource base without geographical relocations because of its flexibility and convenience. The traditional barriers to attaining university education are removed and society is transformed into a school. The case in point is where many African who were denied university education due to colonial ideology, in spite of their high levels of proficiency, are now able to access it through ODL thus influencing their personal development as well as their communities. Higher education has a formative character, that is to say, it instills both character and accountability in the beneficiaries. In the ODL system there is more self-policing hence the products are a high caliber breed of accountability and discipline. Precisely, ODL develops individual thinkers who can relate their work and study to their environment thus increasing productivity. Higher education has a transformative element; societies, cultures and communities are not stagnant thus the role of higher education is to assess, evaluate and help all systems at national levels and propose ways of developing and transforming them. ODL students have “hands-on” experience hence they become most suitable for the cultivation of knowledge and its retention. In a broader perspective, by learning in their own environments ODL learners can directly and immediately facilitate the socio-economic development of their communities. The ODL mode of delivery is a unique experience of participative transformation to both the student and the institution. There is assured and guaranteed continuity and applicability of the program of study to the environment and work thus great relevance to national development. Let me hasten to say, there are problems that are specifically African and require African solutions. In this era of knowledge explosion and revolution we need to look into the traditional knowledge systems such as the endogenous and indigenous knowledge as resources for national development agenda amidst other solutions.

The major drawback to all these contributions is the availability of resources. It is my sincere hope that this august research seminar will address to an extent the problem of resources. To attain full capacity of our higher education institutions there is need for funding of development projects, there is need for an ICT revolution in Africa to fully
enhance the stifled growth. There is need for suitable infrastructure to meet the high demand of higher education.

**Conclusion**

Open and Distance Learning is effectively a new paradigm and strategy for development for Africa and indeed for global development. Despite the huge demands and constraints of attaining the desired goals, academic work in Africa still becomes the sole hope for a better future. Knowledge has become an economic commodity hence its creation, acquisition, and dissemination is a top priority for universities in Africa. Salvation rests ultimately in higher education to bring to halt the extreme hunger and poverty, extreme illiteracy and improve the health of populations. Benefits of higher education especially with the ODL mode are inevitable: both private and public. Private individuals get themselves better employment prospects, higher salaries that subsequently lead to better health and better primary and secondary education for the children. There is a high degree of entrepreneurship and specialization that all stimulate productivity hence development. Countries do benefit as well from higher education; there is more public investment, tax revenues rise and there is less government spending from the reserves. On the whole there is social development. I have not exhausted all possibilities in higher education but have tried to stimulate discussion on how this noble goal of development through education can be attained and worked for. Transformation begins with individual education and the time is now.
References


*The Millennium Development Goals, 2005*


[www.col.org/speeches/JD_0508NOLNET.htm](http://www.col.org/speeches/JD_0508NOLNET.htm)

Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*

Introduction to Open and Distance Learning: The Commonwealth of Learning. See also [www.col.org/resources/startupguides/intro_learning.htm](http://www.col.org/resources/startupguides/intro_learning.htm)

Zimbabwe Open University [www.zou.ac.zw](http://www.zou.ac.zw)