



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE-CHANCELLOR, UNISA

ICDE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

SYMBIOSIS CENTRE FOR DISTANCE LEARNING

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Unleashing the potential of ODL – reaching the unreached.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

(The **Padma Bhushan** is the third-highest civilian award in the Republic of India, after the Bharat Ratna and the Padma Vibhushan, and Dr Swati Mujumdar is the daughter of Dr SB Mujumdar),

- Padma Bhushan, Dr S.B. Mujumdar: President and Founder of Symbiosis

- Dr Swati Mujumdar, Director: Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning (SDL)
- Tan Sri Emeritus Prof. Gajaraj Dhanakaran: Chairman of the Board of Governors of Wawasan Open University.
- Dr Shravan Kadvekar
- Members of the ICDE Board of Executives and all ICDE members present
- Colleagues and peers from the global Open, Distance and e-Learning community
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

It is an honour and privilege to be with you today and to deliver this address at a time of significant development and opportunity in Open and Distance Learning: at a time, I would suggest, when we are in the fortunate position of being able to capitalize on the large volume of research that has begun to emerge from the ODL environment and which is enabling us to make more informed and pragmatic choices when it comes to our business models and our scholarship. My address will therefore attempt to contextualise ODL in 2017 and offer some thoughts on the way forward.

For well over one decade we have been assailed by a constant flood – one could even call it a barrage – of “hard-sell” around what is possible in higher education as a result primarily, of technological innovation and advancement, which gained massive momentum when the internet went public at the end of 1991. The most enduring and prevalent narrative of the technological revolution in higher education has been its perceived potential to open up access to quality, affordable education to masses of previously excluded students, *especially* through Open Distance Learning. Sir John Daniel’s now ubiquitous assertion that technology could break the exclusionary “iron triangle” of access, cost and quality¹ sums up, in my view, the attitude and active belief on the part of many Distance Education providers, that technology could and would indeed achieve its potential and promise. And so what we have witnessed over the intervening years, has been a decisive shift from traditional models and understandings of Distance Education, to an embracing of online and e-learning – hence the currency of the acronym, Open, Distance and eLearning (ODEL).

¹ Sir John Daniel, Asha Kanwar, and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić. Breaking Higher Education’s Iron Triangle: Access, Cost, and Quality Commonwealth of Learning CC BY SA March/April 2009 | Page 1 of 9

A second key outcome of technological innovation, which is aligned in a fundamental way to the focus on delivery at scale, particularly in ODL institutions, has been a quite remarkable and innovative re-orientation and reinvention of the construction, transmission and assessment of knowledge. Courseware content and development, its transmission to our students and our modes of assessment and support have dominated DE conferences and demonstrated unequivocally, that humanity's creative and innovative impulse is as strong as ever – which is a really affirming realisation and perhaps, long overdue. However, this focus at conferences and by extension, on research, has perhaps been at the expense of a greater appreciation and understanding of the systemic and transactional technological environment, which is critical to successful ODL delivery. It is in fact in this aspect of ODL and not the pedagogical component, that has seen so many projects flounder and even fail over the years.

A third outcome of the technological revolution has been an unprecedented flood of private and for-profit HE providers into the HE “market”, who have embedded themselves confidently into a sector that for nearly 1000 years has been characterised by, and classified into, distinct and well-understood categories and hierarchies – not to mention traditions. Not only that, but I believe that it would be fair to suggest that these newcomers have not only dominated the conversation, but vigorously shaped and driven the agenda of online and eLearning. This is not a criticism colleagues, but an observation.

A fourth impact factor on the current status of ODL, has been the surge of global socio-economic-and political factors that indicate strong shifts towards nationalism and regionalism, and with it, a fragmentation of global HE coherence that in any case, has been growing increasingly opaque and difficult to argue.

Within this context, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, the past decade has offered up some valuable lessons and insights, now supported by excellent research and perhaps more pertinently lived experience. I would like to make three short observations, after which I will conclude.

Firstly, the *quality* conundrum in ODL has not, and is increasingly unlikely to be, overcome; especially on a global scale, making claims of the global relevance and applicability of ODL qualifications increasingly unlikely. There are numerous initiatives underway to mitigate the quality challenges we face as ODL practitioners, but they have not yet delivered results we had hoped for. Given the current volatility of the global socio-economic-and political environment, it is unlikely that these initiatives will gain the global traction we so desire, for the foreseeable future.

Second, there is an alarming “looseness” around what is understood by “education”, which I believe is largely attributable to the influx of private and for profit providers, many of whom

use the lure of free, accessible, quality education, but who offer little of genuine merit and value when it comes to quality, credentialing and relevance. One merely needs to consider the impact and influence of MOOCs these past years, and compare that to their current evolution and niche status and impact, to realise that there has been an inevitable balancing out of their potential and its actualisation. Another example is the rapid transformation and ascent of Pearson into the HE domain, and their current undertaking to completely re-strategise in the face of the emerging realities of the sector. One can perhaps anticipate that the same lesson will be learnt from OER. Clearly, where education was once understood by the public to mean “*reading, writing and 'rithmetic'*” that culminated in an acknowledged formal qualification or phase, it now encompasses virtually any form of edification that may be provided online. The distinction resides in quality and credentialing. That understanding is beginning to bubble to the surface and both students and the broader public are demanding greater accountability and ethical conduct on the part of providers, in guaranteeing quality and relevance.

Thirdly, and this is my last point ladies and gentlemen, is that perhaps *because* of the emerging nationalistic global trends and the conflation and confusion in the global HE sphere in regard to the types and quality of education, we are witnessing the growing relevance of “context” as a determinant of university strategies and business models. The notion of a “one-size-fits-all” ODL model is redundant. Context, and here I would include socio-political and economic contexts, is not only shaping what is affordable and viable in relation to national infrastructure and capacity, but also what would and could feasibly contribute to national growth and development, while aligning to global initiatives such as the SDGs. Increasingly our students want to be relevant to their own contexts, particularly in regard to their future employment, and it would appear that HEIs are cognizant of that fact and that they are re-orienting themselves accordingly. I don’t have the time to go into details ladies and gentlemen but that observation speaks directly to the concept and practice of internationalization.

In conclusion distinguished guests ladies and gentlemen: while ODL still retains the same potential to offer quality education utilizing economies of scale, reduced costs to students, multi-location access, synchronous and asynchronous timing, flexibility of choice and duration, and innovative pedagogy and delivery models, this needs to be done cognizant of available infrastructure, capacity, internet access and cost, effective and efficient learner support, amongst others. There is, one discerns, a creeping sentiment amongst the more traditional educationists which equates “online learning” - even quality assured and credentialed ODL - with a lack of quality and inferior education. This is alarming to say the least.

Some of our sister institutions, who, in their haste to be “early adopters” of technology or cutting edge ODeL practitioners, or who might have seen an opportunity for easy profit on the back of technology, are having to regroup and re-strategise and in some cases, even rebrand, in

order to regain some of the lost gravitas and standing amongst their peers. Successful ODL practitioners in the current environment will need to have a thorough knowledge of their contextual realities, and of what is genuinely feasible in the quest to “reach the unreachable.” In fact, one almost has a sense that a 1000 year old profession – the second oldest in the world - is reasserting its authority and imposing on us its *own* sense of order in the current opaqueness around what constitutes quality ODL.

I thank you.