

Foreword

I am deeply honoured to contribute a foreword to this book, *Does Distance Education in the Developing Context Need More Research? Building Practice into Theory*, by the editors, Dr Folake Ruth Aluko and Professor Daniella Coetzee. The editors ask the most pertinent question in the book's title, a question that is of profound importance to educators in general, but to open distance and e-learning scholars, researchers, and specialists in particular. The question is whether 'distance education in the developing context needs more research?' UNESCO's (2021) International Commission on the Futures of Education report, *Re-imagining our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* asks a pivotal question that pertains to Aluko and Coetzee's book, "What role can education play in shaping our common world and shared future as we look to 2050 and beyond". UNESCO observes that the world faces "multiple, overlapping crises. Widening social and economic inequality, climate change, biodiversity loss, resource use that exceeds planetary boundaries, democratic backsliding, disruptive technological automation, and violence are the hallmarks of our current historical juncture". UNESCO (2021) paints a gloomy and sombre picture of the world's futures:

"Paradoxical development trends are leading us on a path toward unsustainable futures. Global poverty levels have fallen, but inequalities between and within countries have grown. The highest living standards coexist with the most gaping inequalities in history. Climate change and environmental degradation threaten the survival of humanity and of other species on planet Earth. More and more people are actively engaged in public life, but civil society and democracy are fraying in many places around the world. Technology has connected us more closely than ever yet is also contributing to social fragmentation and tensions".

UNESCO (2021) makes a damning judgement call, which underscores the publication of the book, *Does Distance Education in the Developing Context Need More Research? Building Practice into Theory* as a timely response and intervention against the above-mentioned trends and challenges that have the potential to render the world's futures unsustainable:

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“These crises and challenges constrain our individual and collective human rights. And they are largely the result of human choices and actions. They derive from social, political, and economic systems of our creation, where the short-term is prioritized over the long-term, and the interests of the few are allowed to override the interests of the many”.

What this means is that we need a new social contract for education that can address entrenched inequalities and repair injustices while simultaneously transforming the *futures*. There is growing consensus that given the fast-changing pace of processes in the world due to the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), which is largely driven by the affordances of artificial intelligence (AI) we need to conceive education in general, and distance education in particular, differently.

In 2015 open distance and e-learning (ODEL) was on the spotlight, its efficacy challenged and widely ridiculed. There were widespread concerns about its relevance and fit-for-purpose. Educationists, mostly from international ivy league contact universities cast aspersions on ODeL. The concerns suggested that students in ODeL are more likely to be (a) adults or post-experience, in the sense that they would not have come to study directly from school; (b) that they would be studying in the post-secondary sector; (c) be part-time students with family or work responsibilities, or both, and that they would have (d) gained access to programmes of study that are more open than those of the elite universities. The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) commissioned a Task Group that was led by Open University, United Kingdom (OU UK)'s emeritus professor, Alan Tait “to examine the ways in which student success can best be supported in open, distance and e-learning programmes, and student drop-out and failure diminished” (ICDE, 2015. *Student Success in Open, Distance and e-Learning*). The mandate of the Task Group was to (a) to propose for agreement data points to support definitions of student success at institutional level; (b) to identify current best practice in strategies for improving student success; (c) to make recommendations for improving rates of student success, and (d) to create a dissemination strategy for outcomes.

Tait's Task Group noted that students on ODeL programmes were profiled and deemed to be more likely to come from lower socio-economic demographic cohorts than those in traditional contact universities. The Task Group noted that while it is impossible to generalize in any absolute way on an international basis about this set of characteristics of students on ODeL programmes, and to collect data to evidence these observations, the above-mentioned descriptors of the social and educational background of ODeL students were gaining wide acceptability. And yet the distinctions between ODeL and campus-based students were less clear at postgraduate level as

opposed to Certificate, Diploma and Bachelors' levels. The Task Group further noted that student success rates are widely reported to be lower for part-time than full-time students, and much lower for ODeL students than for part-time students as a whole. It seemed then that the issue was therefore between the perceived strengths and weaknesses of ODeL students on the one hand, and on the other, the OdeL modes of study themselves.

Generally, the term 'distance education', also known as 'open distance and e-learning', refers to all forms of education in which there is a physical separation between students (the recipients) and the facilitator and/or the institution for a significant part, and sometimes all, of the learning journey. Widening access to higher education has fostered a greater interest in the use of distance education for all levels of education, though to differing degrees. UNISA *Policy on Open Distance e-Learning* (2018) defines distance education as "a set of methods or processes for teaching a diverse range of students located at different places and physically separated from the learning institution, their tutors/teachers as well as other students". The policy defines open distance learning as "a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. Open distance e-learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed". Scholars of the OU UK, Brenda Gourley and Andy Lane (2009,) describe OU UK as an institution that "has no barriers to entry, no entry requirements - only exit standards. A person's background and previous advantage or disadvantage is entirely irrelevant". They contend that "open education potentially opens up not only who produces the 'content' and the 'context' in which the 'content' is learned, but also who validates that learning so that it has the currency in the labour and/or interest markets".

This book examines research trends in ODeL on the African continent with a view to identifying the missing gaps and building research into practice. It is premised on the assumption that evidence-based research has the potential to improve theory and practice while at the same time informing policy. The book is an invitation to distance education policymakers and specialists to be research-informed and research-informing. It is a rich volume comprising twenty-four (24) chapters by mostly South African scholars and researchers. However, there is also a presence of ODeL views by scholars and researchers from other countries, such as Botswana, Cameroon, Canada, Eswatini, India, Kenya, Nigeria, and Rwanda. This adds the desired diversity of trends and challenges in distance education. The book is structured around six (6) guiding themes, namely, (a) History, philosophical and theoretical approaches, and paradigms in distance education; (b)

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Building frameworks in distance education research; (c) Praxis in distance education research; (d) Regional trends and gaps in distance education research; (e) Scholarship in distance education research, and (f) Quality assurance in distance education research.

My overall assessment starts with an attempt to answer the question the book asks in the title: “Does distance education in the developing context need more research?”. And my answer is a resounding ‘yes’. The trends and challenges that UNESCO’s (2021) report, *Re-imagining our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* raises, of widening social and economic inequality, climate change, biodiversity loss, resource use that exceeds planetary boundaries, democratic backsliding, disruptive technological automation, and violence. The fact that global poverty levels have fallen, but inequalities between and within countries have grown; that the highest living standards coexist with the most gaping inequalities in history; that climate change and environmental degradation threaten the survival of humanity and of other species on planet Earth; more and more people are actively engaged in public life, but civil society and democracy are fraying in many places around the world, and that while technology has connected us more closely than ever, ironically it is also contributing to growing social fragmentation and tensions, all require more evidence-based research for their solutions.

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In my view this book is suited for a diverse and multifaceted audience. It is an invaluable source for education academics seeking a nuance understanding of the ODeL playing field or context. But it can also serve as an invaluable resource for researchers and specialists trying to carve an ODeL theme for themselves and their future research ideas and projects. Most importantly, it can serve as an informative ‘go-to’ reference point for ODeL policy makers. I highly recommend the book.

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