

Chapter 1:

Setting the scene – Why research distance education?

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Introduction and background

One could argue that the need to widen access to education has fostered a greater interest in the use of distance education for all levels of education, though to differing degrees. In addition to this is the link between higher education and a nation's economy. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been a great teacher for all stakeholders that education can no longer be at its former status quo, where it was compulsory for the majority of students to be on campus. Education providers are compelled to think out of the box and be innovative in the delivery of their programmes – hence, the greater acceptance of distance education.

Although there are presently different terminologies for the term “distance education”, it generally 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. Technology is key in this form of education because it determines to what extent the geographical distance is minimised and how the benefits of technology are maximised. This is because as noted by Moore (2007), there is a transactional distance in all forms of teaching and learning, and distance is likely to be increased if there is also a physical distance as well. This has led to various terms that are now being used for distance education such as open and distance learning (ODL), open distance e-learning (ODEL) and blended learning, to mention but a few.

Lingard (2013: 115) defines educational research as research with “educational or educative purposes, that is ... progressive in the sense of seeking and desiring to improve both education policy and professional practice in education.” One could thus argue that the purpose of distance education research is not essentially different from that of educational research in general, if the purpose is to improve practice, among others.

Although distance education dates back to over a century of theory, research and practice (Zawacki-Richter & Qayyum, 2019), Zawacki-Richter and Naidu (2016) indicate that research in the field is comparatively fledgling in comparison to educational research in general. Distance education in Africa as well, has a long history with one of the biggest mega universities in the world being hosted in South Africa, known as the University of South Africa (Prinsloo, 2019) However, research in the field on the continent is yet to come into its own. Nonetheless, these assertions do not take away from the huge advancement that has been made within a short time both internationally and on the continent (Peters, 2014).

If the mode has come to take a centre stage in the field of education, distance education practitioners need to return to the salient question: “Why research distance education?” “How can we improve in distance education research to impact our practice? Both Lingard and Renshaw (2010) cited in Lingard (2013: 116) assert that “policy-makers in education and teachers need to be both research-informed and research-informing”.

Distance education

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As earlier indicated, distance education denotes a field of study in which the student is essentially separated from the author that therefore, necessitates the use of technology. According to Biao (2012, section 3.3), “distance education is a process whereby an individual or institution packages information in a learnable way with the view to helping another individual or group of individuals to learn at a distance” with the help of “all available media, methods and techniques to enable learners access needed information”. Due to its ability to widen access to educational opportunities, the mode speaks the language of justice for the disadvantaged in the society (Simpson & Anderson, 2012; Saykili, 2018). Therefore, the mode has become almost a worldwide phenomenon and is becoming more popular in emerging economies due to the key role higher education plays in “knowledge and human resource development” (Makoe, 2018; Zawacki-Richter & Qayyum, 2019).

The challenges facing the mode in Africa include: the lack of national ODL policies, the reluctance to accept ODL products, paucity in ODL quality assurance frameworks and ODL experts in the area of philosophy, principles and methods, ODL programmes irrelevant to the context, and the low-level usage of ICTs due to a myriad of reasons, among which is shortage of electricity supply (Biao, 2012). Although not downplaying the achievements so far, a decade after these findings, the mode still struggles with these challenges on the continent (Reju, 2016; Makoe, 2018; Mayanja, Tibaingana & Birevu, 2019; Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). In spite of these challenges, many

institutions in Africa have adopted “open, online and distance education-based models as the most viable delivery tools in expanding access to higher education” (Makoe, 2018: 5). This move has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Dhawani, 2020) that has forced institutions to adopt at least the hybrid model. More expansion into the distance education delivery mode, forced by the pandemic and the need for physical distancing, could be said to be a blessing in disguise for emerging economies due to the fact that the GDP of a country is tied to its educated citizenry (Rivza, Bikse & Brence, 2015).

Although the delivery mode cannot be divorced from technology, Gunawardena and Mclsaac (2013) explain that the course which the mode takes in each country would depend on what technologies are available in such a country. This means that the landscape of the mode is not levelled, while some countries, especially in the developed context have advanced with the mode’s delivery, emerging economies are only experiencing massive growth in recent times, and therefore, some level of technological development (Zawacki-Richter & Qayyum, 2019). Buttressing this fact, Mishra and Panda (2022), assert “benefits from technology-enabled learning (TEL) are not comparable across the board”. Undoubtedly, technologies have brought changes to how education is delivered. Tagged the “digital turn”, Zawacki-Richter and Qayyum (2019) assert that various nations and educational institutions are reacting inversely to the macro process of digitalisation.

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Distance education research

Song (2021) defines academic or scientific research as that which has to do with “(i) linking (that is a ‘conversation’) what has been done (the past) with what has to be done (the present and/or future) in a way to generate new knowledge and (ii) objectifying what you are doing in a way to contribute to your chosen field (or community)” (p. 407). Directly linked to this is educational research which focuses on educational matters such as students, teachers, pedagogies, context, and management of teaching and learning, to mention, but a few. According to Lingard (2013), research in the field of education (an ever-growing field) can be defined by its focus or subject and the hypothetical and procedural resources to bring an understanding to the subject. Research in distance education is not essentially different from other scientific fields since it also focuses on investigating and providing answers to specific phenomena, in order to better understand the past, evaluate the present and prepare for the future. Thus, distance education research reflects research in other educational fields (Simonson, 2019); Satyanarayana and Mantha (2018), for instance, cite

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adult learning to buttress this point. According to Abedini, Abedini and Zowghi (2021), adults were the ones previously mostly involved in distance education, while digital technologies have further opened wider opportunities to adult learners. Research and erudition in distance education builds the mode for the future (Anderson & Simpson, 2012).

Research in distance education is as old as the mode itself (Zawacki-Richter & Qayyum, 2019), however, literature shows early research in the 1960s focused on comparative studies between different delivery media and student performance with the results showing no significant difference (Gunawardena & Mclsaac, 2013; Saykili 2018). In addition, at this stage, research in the field was accused of a lack of theoretical foundations (Saykili 2018). However, research in the field has since moved beyond this level to focus more on learners' characteristics and perceptions in addition to interaction patterns and their contributions to the general learning milieu with what medium can add more value to learners' learning experience instead of technology per se (Simonson, 2019). The author also asserts current research in the field has the tendency to be more theoretically sound, thereby adding value to practice.

4 In spite of these improvements, scholars (Zawacki-Richter & Qayyum, 2019; Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016) in the field have indicated research is still in its embryonic stage, with more to be done in emerging economies. For instance, in their survey of research in Indian distance education, Satyanarayana and Mantha (2018), highlighted three areas of concerns: "comprehensiveness, methodology and coverage of research problems studies" (p. 137). In addition, in their analysis of open distance and education research trends, Çakıroğlu, et al. (2019, Conclusion and recommendations, lines 10-30) identify gaps in areas such as "distance education technologies, support systems, teaching practices, and pedagogical approaches, better understanding of the relation between paradigm shifts that occur in open and distance education and how to design and deliver online courses effectively". Others according to the authors are "remote labs and virtual environments to provide improvements in the field, a more mixed research method (due to the shortcomings of qualitative and quantitative methods), the legality of distance formal education and their standards, and online learning design and the use of learning analytics to create actionable knowledge that can contribute to pedagogical effectiveness". Although the distance education mode is taking root in Africa and other emerging economies, practitioners would need to pay serious attention to these research niche areas.

The distance education delivery mode has been adopted worldwide, and especially in emerging economies due to its ability to widen participation. Makoe (2018) thus recommends for instance, futures research as a tool to analyse policies relating to the mode in Africa, where governments

are beginning to realise the potential danger of staying glued to the brick-and-mortar system of education. The World Economic Forum (2021) defines futures research as the methodical study of possible, probable and desired futures aimed at helping leaders and the society at large manage improbabilities and build-up their resilience and innovation. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has driven this point home for the world when countries had to find a way to continue to educate its citizenry in the face of school closures; the only mode that came to the rescue was distance education.

In addition, most of the research areas earlier highlighted by Çakiroğlu, et al. (2019) could be regarded as aspects that Africa, especially with other emerging economies, would need to pay serious attention to if it were to reap the benefits of the mode. For instance, citing the example of South Africa, Zawacki-Richter and Qayyum (2019) indicate that online technologies are mostly currently being used to support teaching and learning rather than being mainstreamed. As well, Satyanarayana and Mantha (2018) emphasise the incorporation of “research philosophies, methods and designs would benefit the developments of theory and practice in distance education” (p. 137).

The value of research to distance education

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The purpose of research is multifaceted. It has the potential to contribute to knowledge, lead to innovative ideas, and support refinement, critique and synthesis of concepts (Satyanarayana & Mantha, 2018). Research can also challenge and alter policy and practice (Bourke & Loveridge, 2017). Vickers (1994) cited in Lingard (2013: 121) earlier identifies four ways in which research outcomes could impact policy, if used by policy-makers and politicians: “research as warning of problems; as guidance for possible policy options; as enlightenment, which can lead to the reframing of policy problems and approaches; and as mobilisation of support for a politically desired policy option”. Research does all of these by providing answers to the questions of what, when, how and why; diagnosing diverse problems; providing first-hand information regarding the nature of social and educational institutions; and suggesting possible corrective measures (Basu, 2020). Furthermore, Heyard and Hottenrott (2021) opined systematic research occupies an important place in knowledge-based communities, which drives scientific and technological advancement and impacts the wider economy and society. Educational research is so named because of its focus on educational practices (Lingard, 2013), which goes the same for distance education as its research focuses on practices and processes in the field (Simpson, 2019).

Distance education research has added value to the field by giving it its foundation and moving it forward (Anderson & Simpson, 2012; Simonson, 2019). Although with some caution, Simonson (2019) identifies twenty-two areas of research in distance as confirmed by literature that can assist to enhance the field. A critical aspect in the field is the nexus between its research and the quality of its programmes, which has been a long-term debate. Nonetheless, Simonson (2019: 32) asserts “scientific inquiry, conducted with rigorous attention to correct procedures, is the key to success of our field. Research and theory are at the foundation of credibility and quality”. Therefore, scholars (Srivastava, et al., 2020; Bozkurt & Zawacki-Richter; 2021) have encouraged further and wider research coverage due to the ever-changing landscape of the field.

Despite these benefits, Ponce and Pagán-Maldonado (2017: 24) identify the challenges facing education research as “the political nature of education; the problem of definition of educational research as a science and the dislocation between educational research and practice of education”. The latter leads to the need for research-informed practices which scholars (Anderson & Simpson 2012; Boser & McDaniels, 2018) have identified as a gap in the field. As asserted by Simonson (2019: 41), “distance education is not different education, what we know about best practices in education is directly applicable to distance education”. Notwithstanding this assertion, there are some unique features about distance education which need to be researched if improvement is to be effected.

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Why this book?

Research in the field of distance education, globally, is still in its embryonic stage, this is more so in the developing context. This book is an attempt to examine research trends in the mode of delivery on the continent, identify what the missing gaps are, and how to build research into practice. If distance education is here to stay and there have been continual concerns about its quality, this book argues that research properly understood, applied and measured has the potential to improve theory, practice and policy. Both Lingard and Renshaw (2010) cited in Lingard (2013: 116) assert that “policy-makers in education and teachers need to be both research-informed and research-informing”.

Although the book provides insight into diverse areas of distance education, focusing on the South African context and international perspectives, its engagement with some aspects of the field is insufficient. This is simply because it is not possible for one book to cover all areas: further work

is still needed in the field. Although we initially set out to write one book, due to the importance of the theme and the interest it generated, we decided to divide the contributions into two volumes. We hope this work which has drawn a wide range of academic discussions on the field of distance education will inspire works.

Organisation of the two volumes

The series of two volumes has a total of 24 chapters that are divided into these six thematic sections:

1. History, philosophical and theoretical approaches, and paradigms in distance education
2. Building frameworks in distance education research
3. Praxis in distance education research
4. Regional trends and gaps in distance education research
5. Scholarship in distance education research
6. Quality assurance in distance education research

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Volume 1

Theme 1: History, philosophical and theoretical approaches, and paradigms in distance education

The first theme is addressed by three chapters. *Chapter 2* traces the history of distance education in terms of its different generations linked theoretically to the pedagogical approaches, dominant in each generation with its research development in line with the trends and advances on distance education provisioning. The chapter provides pointers on the future of distance education research, with a view to suggesting new paradigms for research in the field. In *Chapter 3*, the author highlights the importance of grounding distance education research in philosophy. It is argued that theory is an essential tool for future research and development of distance learning in the rapidly changing environment. However, the lack of guiding theories in the field is viewed as a critical weakness of open distance education practices. Despite earlier calls by Moore (1973) and Holmberg (1987) to

establish a theoretical framework for the study of distance education, this has not yet been fully realised (Wolf, et al, 2020). The chapter subsequently explores theories that have been applied in distance education research and focuses finally on the uncritical permeation of inter alia neoliberalism on distance education theory and practice. *Chapter 4* focuses on the development of a framework for teaching and learning in online distance education. Situated in theoretical and interpretative analysis of connectivism, the Community of Inquiry and *Ubuntu*, the author argues that despite the advantages of the mode, pedagogical strategies must support the increasing role of technology in teaching and learning within this unfolding landscape.

Theme 2: Building frameworks in distance education research

8 There are three chapters within this theme. In *Chapter 5*, the authors take a look at the field of distance education research, the impact of research on practice over the years and proffer suggestions (with examples) on how practitioners in the field can improve on using research to improve practice and build practice into theory. The authors borrowed from Gibson's Affordance Theory which states that the form of the objects surrounding us shape the perception of what it is possible to do with them. With a focus on Alan Tait's framework for student support, *Chapter 6*, stresses the need for institutions in emerging economies to contextualise student support services in distance education for effectiveness to correct the mismatch between what is needed and what is availed by institutions. The chapter also suggests indices, which should serve as a guide to practice. *Chapter 7* focuses on driving innovation and excellence in distance education practice through Practitioner Enquiry. The author expounds on the nature and rationale of Personal Inquiry as a research methodology within the distance learning milieu, while seeking to establish criteria and practical procedures for its integration into day-to-day personal reflective practices and departmental, faculty, or even institutional academic quality assurance initiatives.

Theme 3: Praxis in distance education research

The third theme has 6 chapters. *Chapter 8* through a meaningful self-directed learning approach takes a look at learning, teaching and assessment methodologies in distance education research, especially given the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter aims to provide guidelines for the DE

facilitator to provide learning opportunities for critical reflection and engagement, thereby becoming an anti-oppressive facilitator. In *Chapter 9*, the authors, while looking into the future, present the learner support initiative the University of Rwanda's Distance Training Programme has adopted. The findings from their mixed-methods design recommend high quality modules, establishing study centres, an increase and diversification of learning resources, incentives for module writers, a timely distribution and revision of modules and investment in ICT in the developing context to make up for the rural-urban divide. Facilitator support services are of crucial importance in distance education, hence, the focus of *Chapter 10*. In relation to these, it explores the trends and gaps in student access and success in the utilisation of e-learning resources, open e-learning resources in terms of technology and media, student and staff support and library matters, learning and assessment methods. Suggestions are provided on the management of these services in the 21st century. The author in *Chapter 11*, tests Anderson's Interaction Equivalency Theorem (EQuiv) in an Open Distance Learning University by focusing on student-student online discussions. This was done with the aim of "getting" the "right" interaction "mix". The findings indicate one form of interaction was not adequate to support students in distance education environments, which necessitated a suggested framework. With focus on the work of OER Africa, in *Chapter 12*, the authors adopt an action research framework informed by three of Guskey's (2000) levels of CPD impact to share the innovative CPD approaches developed for African academics. The chapter discusses their experience for ODL institutions and research in the field. It concludes with recommendations for larger scale models for CPD in African higher education institutions. Although the UNESCO General Conference has unanimously adopted the UNESCO Recommendation on OER, the authors in *Chapter 13* advocate for the need to measure the effectiveness of the instrument and particularly its impact on improving educational outcomes. They thus put forward a conceptual model that could be considered in this important aspect of distance education.

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Concluding thoughts

Clearly distance education is no longer a second-option mode, but has been mainstreamed, especially given the COVID-19 pandemic. The question then is no longer which mode is better, but what we can do as practitioners in the field to enhance it. Volume 1 deals with the history, philosophical and theoretical approaches, and paradigms in distance education, while other authors have shared how we can build frameworks in research in the field. In addition, others

have shared their experiences of some examples of praxis in the mode of delivery. In Volume 2, the authors in the last three thematic sections relate some regional trends and gaps in distance education research, scholarship in distance education research, and how to build research into practice to improve the quality of the offerings. If distance education is here to stay and there have been continual concerns about its quality, these books argue that research properly understood, applied, and measured has the potential to improve theory, practice, and policy in distance education.

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