


Chapter 1


Challenges and Strategies in Open and Distance e-Learning for Universal Access

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ABSTRACT

The intensive development of the Open, Distance, and e-Learning (ODeL) field has altered the educational playing field of the vast world shift of learners outside the classrooms and into the wide world of opportunities. This chapter discusses both challenges that institutions and learners face in providing ODeL, such as technological infrastructure, digital literacy, accessibility and pedagogical adaptation. It also examines the possibilities of the ODeL ecosystem emerging technologies such as AI, VR, OERs, cloud-based learning, and mobile learning. The strategies that are effective in meeting the institutional readiness, learner engagement, inclusivity, and quality assurance are discussed to offer a roadmap of the sustainable adoption. The examination sheds some light on how ODeL has become a game changer, by closing the equity, flexibility and universal access gap, to ultimately serve as one of the pillars of education in the future of a global world.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education has been considered as one of the fundamental human rights besides being a critical tool in social, economic and cultural development (Zendeli, 2017). It is characteristic of societies that provide equitable access to high quality educational opportunities that the levels of social mobility, innovation, and productivity are high. Nonetheless, the commitment to offer meaningful learning opportunities to the learners across many parts of the world has eluded people over the decades despite the international agreements. Issues that have challenged open and distance e-learning especially in the developing contexts include (Andersson and Grönlund, 2009); limited infrastructure and learner support, and, digital readiness (Arinto, 2016). In South Africa, the transition to e-learning has been intense as it demanded the integration of technology and greater accessibility to open distance learning (Ngubane-Mokiwa and Letseka, 2015).

Geographic inequalities, gender inequality, inequality in income, inequality in disability and inequality in social status continue to pose impediments that deny many people the opportunities to experience the life-changing forces of education. Universal access to education is thus not becoming a policy aspiration but rather a need in terms of sustained and inclusive development. Elearning can be described as a continuum in open and distance learning that has widened prospects in flexible education provision (Guha and Maji, 2008). Issues of quality insurance and institutional credibility have maintained priority in the development of open, distance and e-learning modes (Gaskell and Mills, 2014).

The significance of universal access has been established in a variety of world frameworks. The International Declaration of Human Rights (1948) recognized education as a fundamental right to any person, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) endorsed it by stating that they aim at providing inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Attaining universal access will not be carried out by simply enlarging the conventional school systems. Multidisciplinary AI applications have been proved to be effective in improving higher education through supporting open and distance e-learning model in South Africa (Ndhlovu and Goosen, 2023). The outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the necessity of curriculum changes as a way to enhance the diversity and inclusion in open and distance e-learning conditions (Van Heerden and Goosen, 2023).

This has necessitated a growing dependence on the more flexible (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013), technologically more permissible and more pioneering technologies directed Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) that has the ability to efficiently deal with space, financial and social barriers. ODeL offers the potential to expand access to learning to previously underserved populations by capitalizing on digital tools, cloud-based learning resources and technologies that provide flexibility in

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