



Distance Education Association of Southern Africa

56th

DISTANCE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHERN AFRICA (DEASA) CONFERENCE 2022

CONFERENCE COMMUNIQUE 03 November 2022, Windhoek, Namibia

At its 56th Conference held from 02 – 04 November 2022 at the Namibia University of Science and Technology, Windhoek, Namibia, under the theme “*Harnessing Open, Distance and eLearning (ODEL) in a Post-Pandemic Educational Environment*”.

The Conference noted the following key issues emanating from the deliberations of the two days:

Internet of Things (IoT) in ODeL

The Conference noted that post-Covid-19 pandemic, there is a stronger appetite for the integration of information communication technologies (ICTs) to support the adoption of eLearning in ODL. Opportunities offered by eLearning in the Open and Distance Learning as ODeL were understood to reach beyond mediation and delivery of learning. There was recognition of the value proposition of the digitalisation of higher education in general and ODL, and the resulting opportunities offered by enhanced connectivity. The Conference proposed the development of contextualised frameworks to guide on the full adoption and utilization of new Internet solutions, including the Internet of Things in ODeL contexts in Southern Africa.

Applying Learning Analytics to Enhance Learning Design in ODeL

The Conference noted the value proposition of learning analytics and the opportunities they offer in helping institutions to understand their students in ways that inform policies and strategies for improving student support services and their learning.



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The Conference noted the value of data and resulting learning, academic and administrative analytics, as well as Artificial intelligence to strengthen the quality of educational services in ODeL. The gap in knowledge and expertise in data, learning analytics and AI within the ODeL fraternity was acknowledged and recommendations on enhancing such capacity was proposed. Enhanced collaboration between ODeL researchers, academics and support staff was seen as a means to maximise timely access to student data and to augment the benefits as well as impact of learning analytics on institutional practices. The continued dominance of analogue data collection methods including outdated student registration processes were found to be a weakness in ODeL institutions. The Conference recommends that ODeL institutions digitalise their operations to ensure that they transition from data-poor to data-rich institutions.

Synchronous and Asynchronous ODeL strategies for enhancing learning

The Conference noted that Covid-19 pushed a lot of ODeL institutions to adopt online learning delivery methods that apply both synchronous and asynchronous methods. The need to interrogate the dominant preference and use of synchronous online teaching approaches that neither support flexible learning, nor are they affordable to students, was appreciated. The Conference recommended that ODeL institutions prioritise the adoption of flexible teaching methods using asynchronous strategies that suit students within the SADC and African contexts.

Blurring boundaries between Distance and Face-to-Face education

The Conference acknowledged the rapid changes in the profile of the ODL student, and its knock-on effects on educational institutions and other stakeholders in the ODeL ecosystem. The need to adjust and adapt to remain relevant was considered crucial for ODeL institutions. The melting boundaries between the traditional classroom/lecture-hall and distance and online learning was accentuated. Conventional education institutions are urged to adopt ODeL methods to enhance student access



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to learning as well as to benefit face-to-face students by enhancing student choice. Challenges such as inadequate internet connectivity for both students and educators were acknowledged and the Conference recommended the adoption of blended/hybrid learning approaches, particularly in dual-mode institutions to maximise the benefits of both modes of delivery. Institutions were also urged to invest in ICTs as the returns on investment go beyond pedagogical delivery as has been evident through learning analytics and AI.

Open Practices for Supporting Online Learning Transitioning

The Conference deliberated on the concept of openness of higher education where some dual mode as well as open universities compromise the principles of flexibility and openness. The Conference noted that leadership of ODeL institutions requires special qualities and qualifications reflective of an appreciation and understanding of ODeL, thereby informing decision and policy making that is accommodative and supportive of student needs. It was also noted that there were implementation shortcomings regarding Open practices such as OER due lack of political will, limited understanding, and lack of appropriate technologies. The Conference noted the need for strategic planning for adoption of open practices that is made easier by the transitioning to online learning. Capacity development of educators and ODeL practitioners, effective orientation of students and development of new, and implementation of existing digitalisation policies were recommended.

Inclusive Lifelong Learning Opportunities for SD in ODeL

The Conference noted the challenges in the field of ODeL regarding the inclusion of students with special needs. Challenges such as lack of suitable learning materials for students with special needs, limited expertise in educators serving these students and the challenges of monitoring effective learning of students with special needs using inadequate methods were highlighted. The Conference was informed of the value of inclusion and how strategies that foster inclusion of students with special needs benefit all students. The Conference noted the need for ODeL institutions to strengthen their



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awareness of the needs of students with special needs and students in deprived environments to ensure that the ODL mode that has traditionally been considered most flexible and accommodating does not end up neglecting the most vulnerable in society, as conventional education has done.

Conclusion

The 56th DEASA Conference expects all stakeholders in the ODeL fraternity to take this Communique seriously and to act with genuine commitment to ensure that Southern Africa and Africa in general takes advantage of the technological gains achieved during Covid-19 in the field of education and in ODL. The Conference also recommends that future DEASA Conferences include ODeL support/ professional staff to build a culture of collaboration with academics, policy makers and researchers, thereby maximising the holistic benefits from these Conferences for the DEASA institutions. The Conference also concluded the need to implement existing policies and review them where necessary, to respond to emerging and dynamic contexts in both the education and technology fields, notably AI and the implications it has on education, teaching, learning and jobs in the field of ODeL.
