

*Zimbabwe Open University  
Vice Chancellor*

*Primrose Kurasha,*

*B.B.S. Hons. (UZ); M.B.A. (Bridgeport, CT U.S.A.);  
Ph.D. (Potchefstroom R.S.A.)*

***Theme: Managing the Drain: Working with the Diaspora***

***Title: The Transformative Aspect of Open and Distance Learning  
Towards Equity and National Brain Gain: the Zimbabwe Open  
University Case.***

*P.O. Box MP 1119, Mount Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe  
7<sup>th</sup> Floor, Stanley House, Jason Moyo Avenue  
Tel: +263-4-251595  
Fax: +264-4-250344  
Email: [pkurasha@mweb.co.zw](mailto:pkurasha@mweb.co.zw)*

## **Introduction and Overview**

Our era, in contrast to the previous ones, has grown from a predominantly physical and agro-based society into a fully-fledged knowledge driven society. This has been coupled by technological advancement and changes in the global market where there is heightened corporate competition, sliding meanings of everything and hence a need to harness knowledge as an invaluable asset. There is an abundance of information: more political and economic freedoms in terms of consumers having free choice of what they need; more innovation and free expression. We have noticed vast improvements in the methods of inquiry and discovery too. Knowledge therefore is now viewed and treated as an economic commodity, a business product and a productive asset. Employees are now hired on the merit of their skill, experience and knowledge depth against the strictly agricultural and industrial societies' criterion where physical strength was the economic commodity. This transition of the whole global economy from the physical realm to knowledge can be termed the knowledge economy and thus a knowledge explosion. Drucker (1994) calls it "the economy of knowledge focuses on the economy of producing knowledge or a knowledge-based economy."

Of utmost significance in this transformation is the transformative nature of the transition. The shift has socio-cultural as well as economic implications. The acquisition of knowledge, the retention of knowledge and the meaning have all changed. Development therefore is pinned onto knowledge. It is in view of this new era, this new phenomenon that this paper discusses the transformative aspect of open learning towards global equity and brain gain. As the paper will show, open learning has become a penetrating tool for development. There is a movement towards value creation, stakeholder satisfaction, social responsibility and integrative approaches to education against a primarily profit maximizing [capitalist] society. In other words with open learning we can, with Peter Drucker, speak of a post-capitalist society.

The theme of this year's conference poses several questions to the alert minds like those here today. Brain drain is not a problem in isolation but has to be looked at within a context and perspective. I propose to begin by positing some frameworks within which we can understand the case in point. We can talk of the historical perspective, the conceptual framework as well as the proposed prescription for the current problem.

### **Historical Perspective: tracing the drain**

A complete picture of brain drain has roots in the world political, economic and social histories<sup>1</sup> of Africa. Just as much as we have the same implications today, we too have roots of the problem in the same concepts. A plausible solution that will attain equilibrium where the Diaspora can be engaged will need a through and comprehensive overview of the processes that led to the current situation. In a 2000 article in the *African Economic Analysis*, Tunde Obadina began by asking:

---

<sup>1</sup> Theoretically one can talk of the *history* of Africa, but I wish to bring a component of multiplicities of history and the interlink between the particular historical phases to give Africa the present face.

“Why go back five centuries to start an explanation of Africa’s crisis in the late 1990s? Must every story of Africa’s political and economic underdevelopment begin with the contact with Europe? ...The reason for looking back is that the root of the crisis facing African societies is their failure to come to terms with the consequences of that contact.”

The physical drain forms a basis for ideological, psychological and economic changes on the African face that precipitated into the present crises and brain drain. The trade had a profound economic, social, cultural and psychological impact on African societies and peoples. It did more to undermine African development than the colonialism that followed it. Through it, Africa lost a large proportion of its young and able-bodied population. It did more to undermine the confidence of Africans in their historical evolution (Tunde, 2000). In a nutshell, slave trade was a physical drain of productive manpower that depleted Africa of its physique. It led to depopulation that stifled African creativity and production. It created, as will be shown later in the paper with reference to brain drain, to a dependency relationship with Europe. This relationship is based on the exchange of Africa’s valuable primary products for Europe’s manufactured goods hence a depletion of economic potential.

Colonialism was a secondary stage where there was no actual reversal of slave trade but a further depletion through ideological implantation and propagation of theories, strategies and ‘developmental’ programmes on an ill-prepared less developed and developing world. This propagation and transplantation of policies onto the developing world has had grave consequences chief among them underdevelopment. As a result there has been socially constructed realities by both worlds that deem Africa, for example, less capable and impotent. Modern Africa’s current status quo is marred by poor infrastructure and less technological development that is yet to match that of the more industrialized nations. To a great extent foreign ideologies that did not propagate well with the traditional African ways and thinking gave rise to unending wars, conflicts, corruption, stifled technical advancement and created a class of elite rulers and traders. (Wright, 2007).

### **Conceptual Framework: The Brain Drain**

With this background one is left baffled by information that has led to Africa’s current crises. There is the neat connection and causative effect of all the processes that have poured into the current crisis. The question and goal of this conference is to pave a way, come up with a plausible and feasible solution to this drain. It is a given, Africa, more than before drags behind the more industrialized nations. Many aspects of livelihood are somewhat lagging behind: technological advancement is quite minimal, economies are mismanaged, there is political mayhem and wars, conflicts across many regions of Africa, corruption is rife and quality governance is compromised. Despite efforts to educate masses, brain drain is the most painful evil of our era. In other words, most educational policies in Africa, despite their heavily colonial slant, have produced quality

professionals that are internationally marketable<sup>2</sup>. Historically the nudging components of slave trade and colonialism are phenomena that have almost slipped through the memories of new generations (though very relevant sources and reference points for the modern era) especially with the mushrooming of universities where quality professionals have been churned out.

Nevertheless, the last fifty years have noticed huge transportations and transfer of knowledge from the poor Africa to the rich West. This transportation to the West is voluntary and not forced anymore. Probably it can be explained as a residual reaction and process by the new African elite to their education. This same education has both colonial and superior quality that the new professionals feel out of place to practice in Africa. In that regard a new way has to be found to address this long-standing problem. I am confident this forum is the platform for not only brainstorming but for a concrete way forward to engage the external professionals for the development of Africa. And I hasten mention here that education, more than ever, has that transformative aspect, the penetrating ideology to address this current problem.

### **Education as a vehicle: Open and Distance Learning (ODL)**

The classical role of education can be summed up in the British Philosopher Richard S. Peters' point of view that education involves the **kinds of processes** through which desirable states of mind are produced. The meaning of knowledge is transient. For centuries the meaning and transmission has taken many forms. From the hunter-gatherer society where knowledge consisted in the skills of conquest; the industrial revolution where knowledge consisted in the capability to move beyond the subsistence living to the present age where we can safely say the post-capitalist society. More and more though, there has been a need for higher and advanced knowledge which as it has tended to appear, is achievable through educational processes which do not center only on the traditional school but probably through continuing education offered even at the place of employment.<sup>3</sup> Our age is the age of post-enlightenment, the age of information and knowledge explosion.

The role of education has undergone tremendous transformation over the centuries. In very significant ways, schools of thought developed from semi-formal education systems into present day universities and colleges. In many other contexts, especially our own contexts of less developed nations, education was historically informal with the old sages as depositories of not only knowledge but also wisdom. Education to many people in the formerly colonized countries came with anecdotes of western civilization<sup>4</sup>, Christianity

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note here that while Africa loses on the expertise, the receiving end gains the same brains. Simple logic suggests that despite the stereotypical perspective of Africa's inferiority, there is a lot of both potential and quality professional churned out of its education systems.

<sup>3</sup> James J. Duderstadt, 1994

<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, the socially constructed "third world countries" have a significant traceable trends of civilization as can be seen from history. This paper does not want to dismiss that fact though makes a point

and commerce. The numerous church-related schools and missions, the history of trade in ancient empires and the residual traits of interaction with foreigners evidence this. In line with the current theme, of harnessing local knowledge and transforming the present status quo into a fully knowledge driven synergistic society we have to re-look at these trends and step on them for progress. Our role today as practitioners of higher education is to appreciate the indigenous knowledge systems and build long-lasting relationships that have a compact base in culture.

Open and Distance Learning, a relatively new concept, has been defined using many approaches: the absence of a teacher, use of mixed media courseware, use of industrialized processes, correspondence, independent and home study as the key aspects. There are some key characteristics that clearly delineate Open and Distance Education from conventional education. The self- study approach is the tacit goal of higher education because it produces scholars who can work independently. Here the student does not stop working for a living and makes open and distance learning ideal for adult learners and busy modern employees. The Common Wealth of Learning<sup>5</sup> distinguishes Open and Distance Learning into various categories all in sum comprising the mode of delivery and learning. It is a learner-centered type of education; open learning with a wide range of choices to the learner; open access without restricted formal entry requirements and entrance examinations; flexible learning, distributed learning and of paramount importance Open and Distance Learning falls along the *continuum of time* and the *continuum of place*. By learning in familiar environments of one's home or office the learner enjoys the pleasant feeling of relaxation while being productive (Harry and Keegan, 1993:12).

The main thrust of open learning is the appeal to students from diverse backgrounds whose energies are channeled towards achievement of higher goals. Education still remains the central lifeline of development, progress and civilization. Precisely, higher education has a role to transform national development through firstly transforming livelihoods. The classical mandate of any university is research, teaching and community development. This is the task we all have as educators and media of higher education – passing on the tradition of knowledge at higher levels. In the developing world context this probably sounds very hypothetical. There are problems of resources and the economies trail behind in many core issues especially provision of cheap, affordable and quality education. It is therefore imperative that *transformation* where the governments and all other stakeholders are involved is necessary and the time is now. The modern understanding of education as basic knowledge generation and nurturing is current. In the context of less developed countries, and in the context of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) perspective, the uniqueness of open learning forms the basis for the present discussion. It is worth mentioning here that the availability of e-learning is instrumental in the provision of higher education. One objective of this paper is to draw conclusions

---

that Western civilization has its remnant traces in the schools opened up and operated from a western perspective in developing countries.

<sup>5</sup> [www.col.org/resources/startupguiddes/intro\\_learning.htm](http://www.col.org/resources/startupguiddes/intro_learning.htm)

from a practical Open and Distance Learning institution, the Zimbabwe Open University and show how in its development, growth pains the institution worked towards world education standards of access to education to all and how to enhance development and personal growth.

Since 1960, universities in Africa have increased from a mere two to more than 100. This is a sign of great revolutions in the education sector. By and large this new development is a result of interaction with ideologies, ideas and paradigms that has seen Africa developing to this extent. As argued already in the scope of this paper, this education has been both transforming and a cause for concern especially if we are to address the issue of brain drain. The major critique of African governments is, in most cases, the lack of full accountability to the people who voluntarily and democratically vote for the leadership. To a greater extent thus one can conclude, in Africa so far there have not been incentives for education. The civil service is the most depleted sector of any African economy. A teacher, a nurse, a police officer in most African countries earns a salary far below the poverty datum line. Yet, these are the people who provide an unavoidable service to the nation. Attaining higher degrees is not matched by equal material and prestigious incentives. This thus, is a main push factor for the over forty years of brain drain in Africa.

Naturally on the other end of the rod, there are high quality services offered. Education is highly rewarded and there is worth for going to school. The earlier description of a post-capitalist society applies to this world. There is knowledge explosion and knowledge management is the current concern. Issues to tackle in this era are human resources management and development, effective communication, adult education, relationship management, clinical performance and information technology management. In short therefore knowledge management will comprise of four key pillars in this era, and these are attractive to the African professionals who voluntarily migrate to the West. These are:

1. Leadership: despite the natural inclination towards mismanagement, corruption and oppression new knowledge-driven organizations require new kinds of leaders. Knowledge is managed in a way that creates a virtual global village based on the interaction of ideas. This ultimately requires a new paradigm and this I propose is open and distance learning.
2. Organization: traditionally the meaning of corporate had a different connotation than it has today. While the agency problem, for example, dominated the emergence of corporates today management is easier through the use of information and communication technologies that have facilitated the growth of the knowledge industry.
3. Technology: more than ever before, technology is the lifeblood of new organizations. At the heart of every knowledge-driven institution is the use of technology. Throughout the world now universities are information nodes, centers of information dissemination. The UNESCO Sub-Regional Workshop Report, 2005 (Harare cluster) cited a number follow up actions from the point of

- view of technology that can be useful to tap brain drain especially tapping the expertise in the Diaspora.
- i. Creation of a directory of Diaspora brains
  - ii. Developing a discussion forum where issues can be tabled and tackled
  - iii. Virtual classrooms and video conferencing
  - iv. Training teachers in ICT issues and litter it down to the schools.
4. Learning: at the beginning of this paper, we mentioned the development of schools and education policies across the world as a phenomenal achievement. More and more the desire, the appetite for learning is growing among the developing nations' habitats. Thus the concept that Africa is merely a third world country is fast becoming obsolete. Africa needs not follow the same civilization and development that the Western counterpart traversed, no. There is need for a new consciousness, leap-frogging the many years of experience and thus paving a new path that surges into the new global enterprise.

### **Transformative nature of Open and Distance Learning: Zimbabwe Open University**

It is envisioned that within the next fifty years education delivery modes will have transformed to wholly open and distance learning given the global village explosion that has bridged all sectors of the economy. This thus becomes a platform for harnessing talent and expertise through research universities rested in the work and home localities of the students. Without necessarily underestimating the role of contact universities, we need to take cognizance of new phenomena of open learning. Open learning takes a holistic approach to education that sees potential in the less privileged and disadvantaged sections of the population. The open and distance learning which enables as many people as are willing to attain education at tertiary level has been embraced as a plausible strategy for this development of world over as corroborated by Lord Sutherland in a key note paper at UNISA on June 24, 2003. He reiterated that Open and Distance Learning was a very popular mode of delivery in the Far East since it fulfils the felt needs at all levels. This could be the need to improve education at a national level or retooling the formerly ill-educated masses.

With Open and Distance Learning the student cannot afford to leave full time employment to study for three or four years; there is immediate value addition to the workplace. Demand for open learning continues to grow thus as it provides an alternative to accessing tertiary education in flexible and is tailor-made to suit the needs of the society. Keegan (1986: 72) however points that despite its popularity across the world, distance education is still little known and less studied. In fact the literature on distance education in many libraries in developing countries in particular bear testimony to this. If one finds any literature it is very old. Open and Distance Learning is indeed a primary tool towards national brain gain. Brain gain is a possibility; while contact universities draw people away from their workplaces and homes into an institutionalized set-up, open and distance learning realizes the value of the student at their usual place or work and residence. There is no need for the rural-urban migration or vice versa in physical bodies but there is the movement of ideas and people develop their habitats.

Thus, at a continental level Open and Distance Learning can be a transformative and penetrating tool for harnessing brain drain. What is required currently is to improve on the quality of delivery especially ODL related modes. The Zimbabwe Open University, an offshoot of the mainstream contact university education has stamped a name for itself and now follows UNISA as the second largest university in terms of numbers in the Southern African Region and the largest university in Zimbabwe despite a mere eight years since its inception. There are however frameworks within which this university can be understood as a brain-gain university and how this example can be transformed at this august forum to harness this perennial problem.

### **The Zimbabwe Open University in perspective**

The Zimbabwe Open University is the sole Open and Distance Learning institution of higher learning in Zimbabwe, twenty-seven years after independence. At the Zimbabwean independence in 1980, the government adopted a very deliberate policy to educate all in order to address pre-independence inequalities in educational opportunities, social strata imbalances as well as the manpower needs and development of the country after the war. It was a culmination of research into the needs of the nation, needs of the economy and a clear sign of creativity by the stakeholders to provide an institution flexible enough to cater for the broad human resource needs especially at the dawn of the knowledge era. A brief historical perspective of the education system that culminated into this ODL institution will do. The overarching goal for the government was an education system that would address the socio-economic needs of the country. Obviously, university education would play a pivotal role in realizing and achieving these goals and objectives.

- By 1993 Center for Distance Education (CDE) at the University of Zimbabwe under the Faculty of Education was offering Bachelor of Education degree with a student population of 749 students.
- 1996 Center for Distance Education became the University College of Distance Education (UCDE), a college of the University of Zimbabwe: more programmes were on offer in Agriculture, Mathematics and English and Communications and the college became popular. Student numbers rose to 3429.
- 1997 the student population had gone up to 5429 and recruitment of staff was becoming specifically open learning oriented. The college had made tremendous impact on the teachers whose performance had dramatically shot up after the new tools from the acquired degrees.
- 1999 March 1<sup>st</sup> By an Act of Parliament the UCDE became the Zimbabwe Open University. The setting up of at least three faculties – Faculty of Science; Faculty of Arts, Education and Humanities and Faculty of Commerce and Law coupled this development. Macro-economic development has surged – industries had phenomenally grown, the GDP had grown and thus the need for more qualified



workers had been growing higher. There was the grip or frenzy of the dawning knowledge economy and nobody could afford being left behind. The Zimbabwe Open University became very popular and the student numbers went up to 14 313.

- 2005 Students were 18 701 and 2006 students were 21 500.
- Overview: from a single Bachelor of Education degree in 1993, the ZOU now offers 23-degree programmes to date with 19 at undergraduate level, two Masters programmes and three post-graduate diplomas. Within eight years 15 000 students have been produced by the Zimbabwe Open University. This is phenomenal; indeed open and distance learning has made its mark and history in the Zimbabwean education sector.

The university has grown thus far because Open and Distance Learning as a mode per se has become itself a penetrating instrument in our era and a relevant tool for attaining higher education. Almost every sector of the economy has had graduates from the Zimbabwe Open University. Thus far, our contribution to development and the education system is immense.

### **Relevance of the Zimbabwe Open University**

All education is development oriented. Development suggests a transformation, movement or change of some irreversible nature, characteristics of which are determined by that which is being developed. This of course involves moving from an existing to an end state, through a process (R.S. Peters and Hirst). African countries are seeking that movement and therefore development is defined as the process of trying to address poverty, conflict, disease especially HIV/AIDS, cholera from individual to national levels. Institutions of higher learning were created to cater for these grand goals and to a large extent have achieved this mandate. As highlighted already, the main objectives thus that the Zimbabwe Open University has worked towards to achieve can be summarized as follows:

- Providing a second opportunity of study to those who missed an earlier chance
- Improving the quality of education engendering learner autonomy through self study
- Providing lifelong education for employed people and homemakers
- Meeting professional training needs in consultation with industries
- Providing an opportunity for tertiary education in a more accessible mode to a larger proportion of the population
- Providing cost-effective education and training
- Being relevant to the needs of the present problems by providing problem-oriented solutions.

This was based on the basic philosophy that investment in human resources development is investment in human capital and complements investment in physical and technological innovation. Issues of equality and manpower development are current. My call therefore is to develop synergistic strategies that enhance retention of qualified

personnel across the countries and indeed in the whole continent. This, ladies and gentlemen will assure Africa of continuity, sustainable development and growth. Let us put our heads together and draw fruits from each other's experiences so that we can attract back our professionals and work towards retaining those we have now by providing proper incentives and rewards.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the gloomy picture I have demonstrated at the beginning of this paper with a trace of brain drain in slave trade and colonialism, the present state of education, economics and social life bears testimony to massive growth and development over centuries. And despite the several challenges an Open and Distance Learning institution might encounter, it is highly encouraging to note that distance education has both an exciting and hope-filled future. For developing economies its flexibility and affordability are key attracting factors. The shift in the world trends – education and knowledge acquisition has caused a stir in the socio-economic and political scenes worldwide. The call is for Africa today to harness this potential and develop to the natural heights of a knowledge driven economy. Inevitably then, cooperation of all stakeholders – both those in Africa today and those in the Diaspora is not an option but a mandate if Africa has to develop. Therefore, I have argued that open and distance learning symbolizes a paradigm shift towards brain gain both at national and continental levels. Open learning is transformative and does not involve physical movement of labour but a development of resident brains and bringing them to greater heights.

## References

Commission of Inquiry in the Establishment of a Second University (1988) *Report*. Harare Government Printers.

Drucker F. Peter (1994). *The Age of Social Transformation*, Atlantic Monthly, 274, 53-80.

Duderstadt J. James in “The Future of Higher Education in the Knowledge-Driven, Global Economy of 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium 2002, University of Toronto, Canada. See also <http://milproj.ummu.umich.edu/publications/toronto/index.html>

Introduction to Open and Distance Learning: The Commonwealth of Learning. See also [www.col.org/resources/startupguides/intro\\_learning.htm](http://www.col.org/resources/startupguides/intro_learning.htm)

Keegan, D. (1990) *The Foundation of Distance Education*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) London: Routledge.

Obadina, Tunde. “Slave Trade as Root to African Crisis” in the *Africa Economic Analysis*. 2000.

Peters S. Richard. *Authority, Responsibility and Education*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959.

Sir John Daniel. “Towards Education for All: The Critical Role of Open and Distance Learning in National Development. Namibia, August 2005. See also [www.col.org/speeches/JD\\_0508NOLNET.htm](http://www.col.org/speeches/JD_0508NOLNET.htm)

“Use of Information and Communication Technologies,” *UNESCO Sub-Regional Workshop Report*. Harare. September 2005.

Wright R. Donald. *Atlantic Slave Trade*. 2007.

*Zimbabwe’s Five-Year National Development Plan (1991-1995)*. Government Printers. Harare

Zimbabwe Open University [www.zou.ac.zw](http://www.zou.ac.zw)