

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AND THE CREATION OF A KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY IN ZIMBABWE. PAPER PRESENTED BY DR PRIMROSE KURASHA ON 25 APRIL 2005 AT THE ZULC ORGANISED INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON OPEN ACCESS AND CREATING A KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY HELD AT THE MONOMOTAPA CROWNE PLAZA HOTEL HARARE, FROM 24 – 26 APRIL 2006.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, I feel greatly honoured to have been invited by the Zimbabwe Universities Library Consortium (ZULC) to present a paper at this very important conference. I am particularly delighted to be part of this conference for two major reasons, firstly the creation and sharing of knowledge is the Raison d'être for our universities and the Zimbabwe Open University is proud to be part of this community of universities. Secondly, as head of the largest open and distance learning University in Zimbabwe I am particularly interested and keen to share experiences with colleagues in this very novel area of open access. This conference with the theme 'open access and creating a knowledge society' could therefore not have come at a better time than now for our University. I am fully aware that this conference brings together practitioners and experts in the field of information and knowledge systems and it is my sincere hope that the ensuing discussions on open access and the creation of a knowledge society will enhance our understanding of this very interesting field and better still enhance our efforts at improving and advancing human welfare.

My presentation today, Ladies and Gentlemen, focuses on Open and Distance learning and the creation of a knowledge society in Zimbabwe. I will address the following issues:-

- What is a Knowledge society?
- How do people join this knowledge society?
- Open and distance learning as a national strategy of enhancing the knowledge society
- What tools does ODL require in enhancing the knowledge society?
- What challenges should we address as ODL practitioners to enhance the creation of Knowledge societies?

Colleagues, I indicated earlier on that the creation and sharing of knowledge is the very reason for the existence of our universities. But let me pause and ask some very simple questions to get us thinking about the theme of this conference;

Precisely what is knowledge and where does it reside? Does knowledge reside in the textbooks, in the lecturer's head, in the faculty or department, in the community or in the library or all of the above? How do we distinguish between knowledge that is relevant and that which is not useful or relevant? What then is a knowledge society? Can anyone create a knowledge society or is it not that one can only enhance a knowledge society?

The term "Knowledge society", Ladies and Gentleman, is relatively new and it has often been used interchangeably, rightfully or wrongfully, with the term "Information Society". In this paper, I opt to use the term "Knowledge Society" as I agree with Barbra Fillips' argument that

the term “Knowledge” refers to “the ability to apply information” to specific areas. Ajit Maru also maintains this view that “ it is not information but learning from information and being able to act through this learning that is important in an ‘information’ or ‘Knowledge’ society”.

Yaacov Iland has defined an IS as “a society where all people can easily produce and access public information”. By public information “he meant” “information that is freely, easily and quickly available to all members of the society”. Drawing from the historical evolution of the term, Atanu Garai points out that initially the development of the IS concept was in the computerisation of the societal, business and economic processes. But today, the IS concept encompasses more of human thinking and processing of information rather than machine led processing of the same. Daniels (2005) also adds his own dimension when he suggests that he prefers to talk about learning societies rather than knowledge societies since the term “learning implies an activity; an activity of learning that any society can engage in”.

An information Society or Knowledge society has thus become imperative especially in the developing world where every effort is required to marshal resources and information in order to overcome the numerous barriers that are working against the advancement of human welfare. Here I am referring to such issues such as abject poverty, HIV/AIDS, TB, persistent droughts and many other social ills.

Against this background it is apparent that certain measures have to be put in place so as to encourage ordinary people to join the Knowledge society. But how do people join the knowledge society?

One of the possible ways for the majority of people to join the Knowledge society, Ladies and Gentleman, in my view would be through education and training and this is where universities come in. Mark my words colleagues when I say one of the ways because I am acutely aware of other possible ways that are being discussed under the endogenous knowledge systems. I shall leave this angle for others to dwell on at this fora.

Societies are looking at promoting development in one way or another and training and education are critical components of this process. For us in higher education this can only be done through making education and training available and accessible to as many people as possible at affordable costs and in a way that is convenient to the circumstances and life style of the learner.

Ladies and Gentleman, you know as much as I do that ODL is now fast becoming the most convenient and affordable strategy of delivering tertiary education to all who need it, at affordable rates. This is due to the fact that ODL knows no geographical boundaries and it enables the individual to pursue both work and learning objectives simultaneously. ODL is not elitist and exclusive but rather it is flexible enough to offer all people education whilst encouraging a high degree of autonomy and self-direction through its self-study approach.

ODL has a significant part to play in addressing the Millennium Development goals in a number of ways. On the issue of hunger and poverty in Zimbabwe, ODL is the best strategy that can be

utilised to reach to rural farmers in a manner they understand and appreciate so that the relevant information may be disseminated to them concerning better ways of growing traditional crops, or about seed varieties resistant to drought and pests, or information about trade and markets (Daniels 2005).

ODL can also be a suitable platform to address the challenges of Education for all. In this regard, ODL is well equipped to provide basic education for adults since it is affordable and accessible. Distance education also has the flexibility to accommodate the needs of various learners at the tertiary level by developing curricula that is relevant to the socio-cultural and economic environment of the learner.

The greatest challenge for ODL is how to marshal sufficient resources and put in place various mechanisms that will make the delivery of the learning process more effective and accessible to many people. This brings us nicely to the question of ODL and open access. Numerous multimedia distance learning systems are currently in use with no one media being considered as the best since “students like a mix of media” (Daniel 2005). What is particularly interesting is that within this whole wide range of media available to our different institutions, the use of e-learning has taken centre stage. Can ODL institutions exploit the growing use of e-learning resources to enhance the knowledge society?

We in ODL have already recognized the importance of e- learning in all our various teaching methods. The availability of e-learning technologies is revolutionizing the training field and this is a major leap in enhancing the knowledge society. Therefore the need to have open access to e-resources, learning materials and instructional software becomes a major requisite in this mode of pedagogical instruction.

Information and communication Technologies can serve as an effective tool in providing information. Yaacov Iland views the knowledge society as a “society where all people can easily produce and access public information”. Parter Sarker believes that “this definition is only attainable through ICT and currently only through the extensive use of the internet”. In order to maximise the use of the Internet in a more effective manner, the issue of bandwidth must be adequately addressed. Bandwidth must be made available and affordable through the effecting of policies that encourage its efficient management.

Institutions can significantly address the expense problem by buying bandwidth in bulk and also by setting up strategies that maximise the use of bandwidth during the day and at night. This will give students the opportunity to connect for longer periods of time thereby gaining more information. Daniel (2005) suggests that the governments can also “subsidise kiosk prices” so that information accessing through the Internet and the World Wide Web becomes affordable to the pockets of many.

Open access has also give rise to the Open Educational Resources (OERs) in ODL environments. According to Daniel (2005) OER refers to “open course content, open source software and tools”. He further observes that “essentially OERs apply to teaching and learning the basic principle of sharing that underpins academic research and its publication”. We therefore need to enhance the ability to share resources. The availability and use of Open Educational Resources

is critical in enhancing the knowledge society. In view of this we are already aware of the negative attitudes towards sharing that have rendered this noble idea futile. Daniel (2005) also comments on the “not-invented-here syndrome” which makes institutions refuse to use educational materials that are not locally produced. Other limiting factors include the restrictive intellectual property rights enshrined in international and national copyright laws, patents and trademarks.

In addition, there is still quite a lot of learning materials that are yet to be made available in digital format. At the same time, the lot that has been digitised is not readily accessible as a result of the mentioned restrictive IP regulations.

The use of OERs could however help to combat some of these problems. We will all need to work very hard in the development and use of OERs. This is the place where libraries come in. University libraries should work at establishing digital repositories of research works and learning materials that should be made freely available through shared access. *Reusable learning objects* are the equivalent of the published papers on which subsequent researchers can build on. It is therefore apparent, Ladies and Gentleman that we need a more fully connected system of repositories so that learning materials can become easily accessible.

The challenge therefore is to combine connectivity and shared courseware in order to increase access massively. The guiding philosophy as we develop connectivity and shared courseware lies in 4 main dimensions as given by Daniels (2005). Firstly, we need to consider the issue of accessibility. For e-learning to have an impact, it should be accessible to the learner. The institutions therefore have a great role to play in making their learning management systems available on their local area network so that it is readily accessible from computer labs and study centres. In Zimbabwe this has proven to be highly important since the majority of students do not own computers with Internet access but have to rely on institutional facilities.

The second imperative is to consider the appropriateness of the OERs’ under use. We need to consider whether the information is context based and if it has the capacity of directly addressing key issues in the development of the country. In some instances the available OERs must be modified to fit in with the cultural context of a particular society and skilled personnel should be given this enormous responsibility. In this way, quality OERs will be established and users can be confident of the credibility of their learning materials.

Thirdly, e-learning accreditation is of vital concern. This brings us back to the issue of sharing materials since it has already been established that quality criteria can be valid across many delivery mechanisms. At the international level various guidelines were put forward by the UNESCO-OECD, which seek to promote mutual trust and international cooperation’s in quality assurance and recognition of qualifications. The development of a decision – support tool to address key questions about quality assurance in open and distance learning by UNESCO has provided the platform of working across borders to provide education through technology.

The final consideration in e-learning regards its affordability. OERs for one, do have the potential to reduce costs in course development and certainly has the potential to do so for the institution seeking to expand access through e-learning. When education is more cost-effective,

it has the ability to appeal to more students. Also the affordability of ODL has meant that more people can enrol thereby creating a better chance of enhancing the knowledge socialites in Zimbabwe.

What can the various stakeholders do to enhance a creation of a knowledge society in Zimbabwe? In my view, the government of Zimbabwe should take a leading role in providing the necessary enabling policy framework to guide and enhance the use of the Internet and the use of open educational resources. In the same thinking that the government conceived ODL to be a national strategy to make tertiary education widely available to all, so it should also emphasise on the use of OER as a strategy of increasing access by making education effective, efficient and affordable to all. The government should also take a leading role in facilitating the creation of the core infrastructure required in ODL. People should be encouraged to develop e-learning content and libraries should take a leading role in the creation of learning object repositories to make the learning content available. Libraries must enlighten institutions about existing copyright regulations and seek copyright exemptions wherever possible. Libraries must also seek ways of using copyrighted materials legally. Libraries should be actively involved in coming up with national open access initiatives that should encompass open educational resources. Libraries should also be involved in review and amendment of the national copyright legislation with a view to reflect the open access ideals.

With regard to barriers of bandwidth the government of Zimbabwe should assist wherever possible by making bandwidth available and affordable. Telecom monopolies and related legislation sometimes limit the availability of bandwidth to ODL institutions. Universities are also encouraged to buy bandwidth jointly in bulk to minimise costs. I am aware that conventional universities which follow a face-to-face teaching model may find it difficult to develop general policies on e-learning because their existing policies and procedures were conceived and designed for a different learning environment. However the introduction of parallel programmes in many universities is a compelling need for these institutions to start developing e-learning policies on OERs.

In conclusion colleagues, ODL through its philosophy of lifelong learning and its ability to reach out to many learners in all corners of the country offers a unique opportunity for the enhancement of a knowledge society in Zimbabwe. The availability of the critical e-learning resources like the internet and open educational courseware would greatly expedite the push toward this noble vision of creating a knowledge society in Zimbabwe.