

University of Nairobi, Kenya
Department of Political Science and Public Administration

Webinar on
Post-Covid Academic Research, Training and Teaching

**Creating the Future for the University:
Building on our Covid-19 Skills and Avoiding our Mistakes**

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Introduction

Good afternoon to you all. It is a pleasure to take part in your departmental webinar on *Post-Covid Academic Research, Training and Teaching*. I join you from Vancouver, Canada, where the day is just dawning.

TITLE SLIDE

My title today is '*Creating the Future for the University: Building on our Covid-19 Skills and Avoiding our Mistakes*'. The covid pandemic has marked a turning point for our universities and for our societies generally. Here in Vancouver, I am the Chancellor of a small business school, the Acsenda School of Management. Last week I teamed up with Acsenda's president and vice-president academic to present a paper to a conference of the Asia-Pacific Association for International Education. Our title was: '*Never the Same Again: Adapting Academic Strategies Following Student and Faculty Feedback from Covid-19*'.

As that title implies, we feel that the Acsenda School of Management will never go back to operating in quite the same way that it did before the pandemic hit. I expect that you feel the same about what has happened in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at your distinguished University of Nairobi. I imagine that what you do in the years ahead, particularly in teaching and training, will reflect the ways that the behaviour of your students and your academic colleagues changed as they adapted to the demands that pandemic restrictions placed on the ways students learned and academics taught.

Much of that adaptation was a response to the disruption that the pandemic caused in your normal ways of teaching. Instead of bringing students to your classrooms and lecture halls you had to reach out to them using various forms of what I shall call 'Emergency Remote Teaching'. Some also called this distance learning, but as I shall make plain, distance learning, or open and distance learning (ODL) as it is often called, is a richer activity than emergency remote teaching.

Saying this is not to depreciate in any way the remarkable efforts that you and your students made to keep the show on the road. Many universities around the world had to move off campus in the space of little more than a weekend, and it is quite remarkable how everyone adapted and made the best of it. I congratulate you all.

FROM ERT TO ODL

But if you are to continue with some level of remote teaching as the pandemic wanes, you should develop a richer appreciation of the range of open and distance learning and the opportunities it presents. This will make your teaching more interesting, more effective, and more cost-effective.

SIX ASPECTS

In the title of this talk I used the words: '*Building on our Covid-19 Skills and Avoiding our Mistakes*'. I shall explore six aspects of distance learning to demonstrate its scope and variety, showing how we inevitably missed out on some of its opportunities in our hasty switch to emergency remote teaching.

1. Distance learning: a long history

LONG HISTORY

My first point is to encourage you to appreciate that distance learning has a long history. I do not need to emphasise this here at the University of Nairobi, because you have already been involved in distance education for fifty years. In 1982, when I was elected president of the International Council for Distance Education, my vice-president for Africa was Ben Gitau, who was director of your university's School of Distance Studies and later Dean of the Faculty of External Studies. At about the same time it was my privilege to be one of Mary Ngechu's supervisors for her Masters in Distance Education at Concordia University in Montreal.

On the other side of your continent, Professor Joe Ansere of the University of Ghana, was president of the African Council for Distance Education in the 1980s. He made an important contribution to the landmark conference of the International Council for Distance Education that was held in Vancouver 40 years ago, in 1982. And if we look south, the University of South Africa has been conducting distance education at scale longer than any other university in the world and counts many Kenyans among its graduates.

So do not make the mistake of thinking that distance learning began with the arrival of the Internet in the late 20th century. It goes back much further than that. Indeed, I would argue that the Christian apostle St. Paul developed what remains to this day a highly successful method of teaching at a distance. St. Paul wrote letters - his epistles - to the infant Christian churches around the Mediterranean where they were studied and discussed by the priests and the people. This system of teaching and learning was an important element in the growth of the church over the next two thousand years. The history of distance education is the story of the addition of various technologies such as printing, postal services, TV, and radio and now the Internet, over the next two millennia.

2. Distance education = material for teaching plus interaction for learning

MATERIAL & INTERACTION

My second point is that good distance education has two key elements: good teaching materials that students can work with on their own, and group discussions where they can explore points of difficulty with a tutor and each other. I believe that putting together an effective blend of these two types of activity is the key to successful distance learning. In a

paper that I published back in the 1970s I called this 'Independence and Interaction: Getting the Mixture Right'. It made the point that distance education requires the student to do some learning independently, using the learning materials, but also to ensure success, to interact with others to clear up points of difficulty and enrich understanding.

The mistake that we made during the pandemic, particularly in places like Canada with a rich telecommunications infrastructure, was to assume that live lectures over the internet were enough. As time went by, at our Acsenda School of Management and elsewhere, instructors started adding asynchronous activities that students can do in their own time. Further development of such activities will be an important part of the future.

3. Get the material to the students

GET MATERIAL TO STUDENTS

My third point is to stress the importance of getting learning materials to the students. As the pandemic continued in Vancouver, we noticed that the performance of our Acsenda students steadily improved from what it had been before covid-19. This was a surprise, but the students explained that as we made more text and video materials available to them, they were able to review them on their own and go over difficult concepts several times. The mistake we made in the early days was to assume that the live lectures on Zoom were enough. It was the ability of students to access them again that made the difference.

As I just noted, the history of distance education is the story of adding new technologies that make materials distribution easier. St. Paul sent out his handwritten letters with couriers on donkeys and camels. Then came printing, railways, postal services and now the Internet, making distribution of study materials today instantaneous and almost cost free.

4. Economy of scale and quality of scale

Point 4 is that one of the great assets of distance learning is that it can be conducted at scale. Earlier I mentioned the University of South Africa, UNISA, which today has 400,000 students and is the largest university on your continent.

MEGA-UNIVERSITIES BOOK

In the 1990s I coined the term 'mega-university' to designate distance teaching universities with over 100,000 students. These mega-universities, of which there are now several dozen around the world, are making an important contribution to expanding access to higher education and the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development goals for 2030. I do not have to remind you that the demand for higher education in Africa is huge. If done properly, distance education can help to satisfy that demand.

ECONOMIES OF SCALE

I am not suggesting that the University of Nairobi should seek to rival UNISA in scale, but I make two points about scale. First, when you are producing something - and learning materials are no exception - it is helpful to have economies of scale. The great economist Adam Smith identified this as one of the key advances of the industrial revolution of the 18th century.

The economists among you will have studied his account of the example of the pin factory. Making one pin is expensive, but by the time you have manufactured 10,000 the unit cost is much less.

Just as important for distance education is what I call quality of scale. If you are designing courses to reach large numbers of students, you can afford to make the investment in doing them well. It was clear that the almost instant success of the UK Open University, when it launched in 1971 with a first cohort of 25,000 students, was due to the quality of its teaching materials, the high quality that scale made possible.

That used to be a challenge for people like yourselves, who are producing courses for hundreds of students rather than tens of thousands. But times have changed. In my appointments at UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning I became active in the Open Education Resources movement, which began 20 years ago, but has developed surely and steadily over the years. What that means is that there is now an abundance of excellent learning material freely available on the Web that you can incorporate in your courses.

The mistake that some academics made was to think that it was shameful to use teaching material that they had not developed themselves. But this is a silly attitude. When you are doing research, you don't feel that you must repeat all the previous research that you reference in your work. The same applies to teaching. It is no service to your students to reinvent a wheel that is functioning perfectly well as an Open Educational Resource (OER).

5. Reaching ordinary people

REACHING ORDINARY PEOPLE

My fifth point is that an essential mission of distance education is to bring education to ordinary people. When I went to university 60 years ago, higher education was an elite occupation. No longer. Most countries aspire to have most of their citizens receive post-secondary education because its benefits to individuals and to countries are increasingly clear.

That is why some large distance teaching institutions are called 'open universities'. Each is open in a slightly different way, but the general idea is to reduce barriers to study - and even more importantly, barriers to successful study.

UKOU 4 OPENS

The UK Open University shocked the academic establishment by removing all pre-requisites for entry. The gamble succeeded, tens of thousands of people, who had not done well in school, came back later to the Open University as adults and succeeded brilliantly.

The mistake that we made in moving into emergency remote teaching during the pandemic was to ignore this ideal of distance learning and focus only on our existing students, who had mostly jumped through the hoops of secondary education necessary to enrol in the university. Moving into the post-pandemic era gives us an opportunity to rethink this.

6. Teamwork

PERRY QUOTE

From the moment of its creation half-a-century ago the UK Open University made a big splash in the academic world by innovating in many ways, such as open admission, the use of TV and radio, and the assignment of a tutor for each student. But when people asked Walter Perry, the university's founding vice-chancellor, what he considered its major innovation to be, he replied that it was developing courses in teams.

Economies of scale made it possible to invest heavily in course production and putting together teams of academics and other specialists to develop each course created the quality of scale that I mentioned earlier. In most of its courses the Open University did not simply inject the old academic orthodoxy into a new teaching system. It recast the thinking about the topic for a new era. This was why the Open University attracted the admiration of the other UK universities long before it convinced governments and industry that it was not a radical and dangerous development.

TEAMWORK

Against this background it was a pleasure for me to observe that during the pandemic our academic staff at the Acsenda School of Management worked together more intensively than they had before: teaching each other how to use new technologies and sharing techniques that had proved successful for them.

I conclude that our mistake before the pandemic was to regard university teaching as a rather private activity in which each instructor operated solo in designing, teaching, and assessing each course. If the pandemic has shown us that teaching should be a more public activity in which we work together with our colleagues for benefit of our students, then it will leave a very positive legacy.

IMPACT COVID 19

To conclude. We are all wondering how Covid-19 will impact the future of higher education. I summarise it by saying there have been good and bad developments.

The good is that millions more students and teachers now have experience of distance learning. The bad is that remote teaching to our normal classes has sometimes taken the 'OPEN' out of Open and Distance Learning.

THANK YOU

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to discussing these six points with you.

Bio: Sir John Daniel holds degrees from the universities of Oxford (MA) and Paris (DSc). After serving as a university president in Canada (Laurentian University: 1984-90) and the UK (The Open University: 1990-2001) he held leadership appointments as Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO, Paris (2001-04), and President of the Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver (2004-12). He has received national honours from France, the UK and Canada, and 32 honorary doctorates from universities in 17 countries. He is the author of over 400 publications on Metallurgy, Chemistry, Distance Learning and Higher Education.