

What is derailing establishment of a public open university?

this week, Uganda will host an international conference on distance learning in Africa. The Open Impact Conference 2019 will be co-hosted by Makerere University in partnership with The Open University, UK and the Association of Commonwealth Universities. Owen Wababaza analyses why the open university model has not taken root in Uganda

Open university comes with immense benefits. It is much cheaper to establish since no elaborate physical infrastructure is required. A few lecturers can handle thousands of students and has the potential to substantially increase access to university education since its tuition is substantially low.

The impact conference under the theme, *Extending the frontiers of access to higher education in Africa: strategies for leveraging international open and distance learning programmes*, is expected to bring together key stakeholders to collectively review the international dimensions of Open Distance Learning (ODL) in Africa.

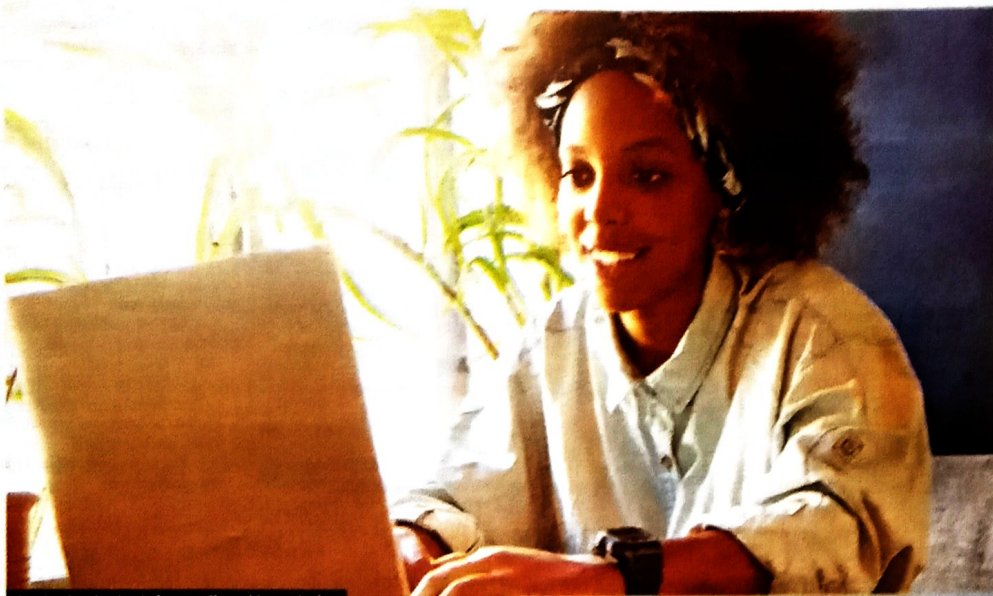
"The conference is expected to promote international ODL to new potential beneficiaries in Africa and assess how international ODL can more strongly contribute to developing a dynamically growing Africa, especially in light of the UN's SDG 4 (quality education for all) and associated SDGs by 2030," Dr Charles Mbalyohere, one of the conference organisers, said.

How open university works
Dr Ndeda Siminyu of Makerere University College of Education and Distance Learning, said the major difference between an open university and a traditional university is that it is single mode, it only admits distance learners and because of that, its regulations are more open.

The Open University of UK, for example, has a policy of open access, you can do a law course without A-level results, but basing on interest or experience.

One may have stopped in Senior Four and you have been doing legal-related work, using the experience and the interest, they will guide you to fulfil your dream of becoming a lawyer.

In terms of infrastructure, you do not need as much



A student studying online. Uganda is yet to set up an open public university

infrastructure as it is for the traditional universities, students just come for short periods and go. Resources for teaching are the key and it is the teaching staff that monitor the quality of materials produced and the resources for teaching.

Once they have been developed, they are self-instructional materials, hence limiting on the number of teaching staff required.

The technical infrastructure depends on the mode of delivery and right now, online is the popular mode.

This can be done on a number of platforms, including mobile devices, but if the constituency you are attending to is economically challenged, you may have to set up centres where students can come and access the materials.

Despite the abundant benefits that come with distance learning, Uganda is yet to open a public open university.

The idea was first brought to the fore in the mid-1990s and since then, stakeholders in ODL have been pushing for the opening of a public open university with little success.

According to sources, Prof. Abel Rwendeire was quite passionate about the idea of an open university while serving as higher education state minister in the late 1990s. He reportedly even set up a committee to put together all that was needed to start one. Unfortunately, Rwendeire was dropped from the education docket before the idea materialised.

Prof. Jessica Norah Aguti, the director of the Institute of Open, Distance and e-learning at Makerere University and one of the proponents of a public open university, argued that for Uganda to leapfrog to the much-needed middle income, there is need to increase access to university education and key to this is the starting of a government open university.

"The entire country is currently talking about Vision 2040, where we expect to become a middle income country, but we may fail to achieve this precious target if the cohorts entering university are still below 10%," Aguti said.

"To achieve middle income status, we need a huge number

GOVT SUPPORT KEY

Prof. John Asibo-Opuda, the NCHC executive director, said a public open university will only come into force if the Government gives it priority.

"Open universities play a major role in increasing access to education as students can study from wherever they are. The initial costs may be high, but in the long-run, it becomes extremely cheaper to run an open university. It is something that can easily be implemented if the Government prioritised it," he said.

Dr John Muyingo, the higher education state minister, concurred with the proponents, saying

the Government was looking at opening one.

"We have had several discussions on the matter and I can say an open university is in the pipeline," Muyingo said.

Saul Waigolo, the spokesperson for NCHC, said an open university is a good idea.

"We have the virtual university and it is doing well. Several universities have started online courses, but a public open university would be a game changer. Unfortunately, our mandate does not include telling anyone to start a university, we will, therefore, guide as per the Act when the time reaches," Waigolo said.

university would revolutionise access to university education in Uganda.

"We need a university dedicated purely to offering ODL. An open university presents an ideal opportunity for internationalisation since it attracts students from all over the world," Okello said.

He added that the shortage of staff that is currently afflicting some disciplines in many Ugandan universities cannot afflict an ODL university.

Aguti said modern technology has made it unnecessary to promise the traditional face-to-face classes.

"Teaching can now be done through experts situated anywhere in the world," she said.

Examples elsewhere

Siminyu cited the example of Tanzania that established the Open University of Tanzania in 1994 and it became the first university in East Africa to fully offer educational programmes on open and distance learning mode. Currently, the Open University of Tanzania has more students than those of all the other universities in Tanzania.

"We also need to learn from the experiences of South Africa. The University of South Africa is defined as a mega university with over 480,000 students. In essence, it has more students than all students in Ugandan universities put together," Siminyu said.

According to the 2014 National Population Census, 180,000 students were enrolled in Ugandan universities and a further 69,000 students enrolled in other institutions of higher learning, making a total of 249,000 students enrolled in higher education.

Open distance learning

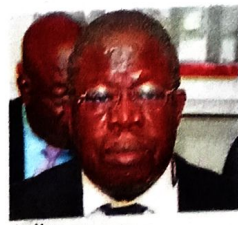
Siminyu said open distance learning has been around since the colonial days. It started as correspondence education under the Makerere University department for extra mural studies, especially for civil servants.

"The extra mural department would identify the needs within the community and some of these were met under correspondence education," Siminyu said.

"Distance learning kept growing until the turbulent years of the 1970s and 1980s when it completely went down. In 1991 the Makerere University council made a decision to revive it. The programme started with a few courses and the demand was overwhelming," he added.



Aguti



Asibo

of university graduates that can engineer transformation and one of the ways to achieve this is by providing affordable and accessible university education," Aguti said.

The 2014 Population and Housing Census revealed that of the total population in the 20-24 age cohorts relevant for participating in higher education, only 9.4% attend university.

Even then, Aguti said, open universities normally utilise a lot of blended methodologies by integrating technology, face-to-face and work experiences — things that do not normally happen in a traditional university.

"And research shows that distance learning has the potential to bring in a lot more of the 21st century skills such as improving communication, enhancing collaboration, promoting independent learning, problem-solving and skills, which the marketplace is looking for," Aguti said.

She added that even the Education White Paper talks about the establishment of an open and distance education university for purposes of increasing access, but the issue has since been shelved and is now gathering dust.

Moses Okello, a lecturer at the faculty of ICT at Kyambogo University, said an open