

National Universities Commission of Nigeria
50th anniversary lecture

***Turbulent and Testing Times for Global Higher Education:
Lessons for Nigeria***

Sir John Daniel

Introduction

You have done me a signal honour in asking me to give this lecture to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the National Universities Commission and it is a pleasure to be in Nigeria again.

It is a nice coincidence that the NUC is holding this event to mark its 50th birthday within a few days of the conference held in London last week to mark the centenary, the 100th anniversary, of the Association of Commonwealth Universities. Many of Nigeria's universities have had a long association with the Association and I am very proud to have been a recipient of the ACU's Symons Medal a few years ago.

The title of the ACU's centenary conference was *Future Forward: Taking Charge of Change*. To mark its centenary the ACU has also published a book with the title *Universities of for a New World: Making a Global Network in International Higher Education*.

Our distinguished Nigerian colleague, Professor Michael Omolewa, has contributed a chapter to that book on the topic *Out of Africa: The University Ideal faces Challenge and Change*. Professor Omolewa was your Ambassador to UNESCO and President of the UNESCO General Conference during my time at UNESCO as Assistant Director-General for Education. When I moved to the Commonwealth of Learning in 2004 I continued to work with him, as Nigeria's representative on the Board of Governors of COL. He is a great friend and a wonderful man.

With co-authors Asha Kanwar and Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, I too have contributed to the ACU book. However, our chapter has a more prosaic title: *Question: Will eLearning disrupt Higher Education? Answer: Massively*.

What I take from all these titles, of conferences, books and chapters, is that everyone in higher education is talking about challenge, change, disruption, mastering the future and moving into a new world. From my reading of the history of Nigerian universities, these are themes that have been familiar throughout the fifty years of the NUC's existence. When I worked at the Commonwealth of Learning we had a special respect for the Nigerian colleagues managing institutions in this country because Nigeria is, to put it mildly, a lively place to run a higher education institution!

From your Nigerian perspective I suspect there were often times when higher education in the rest of the world looked remarkably peaceful and stable compared to academic life here. That situation has now changed with a vengeance and explains the choice of my title for this lecture: *Turbulent and Testing Times for Global Higher*

Education: Lessons for Nigeria. Gone are the days when western universities were supremely confident of the correctness – even the righteousness – of their approach to academic life.

I savour a quotation that Professor Omolewa took from Sir Eric Ashby's historical writing about colonial higher education in Africa where he says: 'the British had 'an invincible confidence in the efficacy of British education, not only for Englishmen but for Indians, Africans, and Malayans and—for that matter—Americans'.

Those days are over!

I come to you from Canada so I shall use a Canadian analogy to set the scene. This boat making its way through turbulent waters, which looks to have a lot of people on board, can stand for many over-crowded universities around the world that are trying to make headway in stormy seas.

You take this boat – some of you may have done so – if you want to get close to the bottom of the Niagara Falls and are prepared to get a bit wet. The boat is called *Maid of the Mist*. You can think of the water pouring over the falls as the challenges dropping down on higher education. Then think of yourselves as the people in the boat and note two features. First, they are surrounded by mist. They can hear the falls but cannot always see them. Second, there is a rainbow, signifying hope and reward somewhere. That summarises nicely the situation of those working in universities.

To begin this lecture I shall drive home the point that higher education faces turbulence and challenge worldwide in two ways. I shall first talk about the scourge of youth unemployment and then describe the current situation of public universities in the United States. After that I shall explore more generally how higher education is changing on many dimensions in these testing times and try, with due humility, to draw some lessons for Nigeria.

A Crisis of Youth Employment

Many parts of the world feel that they have not yet emerged from the global economic crisis that began five years ago. Perhaps the worst feature of this crisis is the high rate of youth unemployment. Earlier this year *The Economist* newspaper devoted a major article to this topic. It gave some alarming figures.

This chart details the millions of young people who are neither employed nor in education or training. It may not feel like it to you, but Sub-Saharan Africa is doing less badly than most other regions. About one fifth of your young people are inactive on these definitions. Only the OECD and the East Asia and Pacific region fare better. But that still makes for a lot of idle hands in Africa as elsewhere. *The Economist* calculated that the world total of inactive young people is nearly 300 million – or one quarter of the world's youth. Yet at the same time employers complain that they cannot find graduates with the right skills and competences. There is a serious gap between education and the job market.

What is higher education doing – and what should it be doing – about this huge problem?

The article concluded that: “Policymakers know what to do to diminish the problem – ignite growth, break down cartels and build bridges between education and work. New technology gives them powerful tools too.” Higher education must focus on two parts of this advice, building bridges between education and work and using some of these powerful tools that technology provides.

Challenges facing US public universities

I shall return to that but let me first take you across the Atlantic and describe the challenges facing public universities in the US. This system of public universities, built on grants of land made by governments many years ago, is widely admired and enrolls millions of students. But it too is suffering from the global economic crisis as well as from some self-inflicted wounds.

Let me summarise the situation of these American public universities in 13 points – an unlucky number for an unfortunate situation. This compilation is from my colleagues at Academic Partnerships, a company that helps universities go online to increase the scale and quality of their programmes. My ex-UNESCO colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić and I are senior advisors to the company.

- 1: Enrolment declined last year for the first time in 15 years – down by 2.3%. That means a quarter of a million fewer students.
- 2: Tuition fees have increased at more than five times the inflation rate for 30 years. This has been an accelerating process.
- 3: Adjusted for inflation, the average middle-class American family earns \$400 less than it did in 1988. But:
- 4: In 2012 universities raised fees by a record 8.3% making a 46% increase over the last ten years. Of course, one reason for this is that:
- 5: State funding declined a record 9% in 2012, down 30% per student since 2000. For that reason:
- 6: Tuition fees as a share of total public university revenue rose 62% over the last decade. Increasing fees is the easy way to try to balance the books.
- 7: In June 2013, the total of discounts given for tuition fees exceeded the total amount paid by parents. This is a 50% reduction from posted rates. Nevertheless:
- 8: Student debt has doubled since 2007. This is a now huge factor in the US economy because:
- 9: Student loans have topped one trillion dollars, more than all the credit card debt, total car loans or total household debt in America. Furthermore:

10: This year default rates on student loans reached a high of 17%. In the US a student loan is one form of debt that you cannot wipe out by declaring bankruptcy. Some students will drag this debt to their graves. Because:

11: A record percentage of recent college graduates are unemployed, 53.6%.
Therefore to save money:

12: 45% of recent college graduates are now living at home with their parents. For graduates aged 18 to 34 the numbers living at home have grown from 13% to 21% in the last decade. And to cap it all:

13: 46% of U.S. college students do not graduate, although the extra income you get by having a degree is higher in the US than in almost any other country.

In summary, these are indeed turbulent times, not only for US public universities but also for much of higher education globally.

How is higher education responding?

How is Higher Education Responding?

UNESCO organizes world conferences on higher education every ten years. The last one was held in 2009 and its Executive Secretary was my colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić. She will be known to many of you as the former head of the higher education section at UNESCO and she has given me invaluable help in preparing this paper. The participants at that conference identified the new dynamics impacting on higher education.

The predominant trend is increasing demand, much of it unmet, especially in the developing world. To address the challenge the range of providers is diversifying. They range from so-called 'world-class' universities in an elite tradition focused on research to vibrant new and different providers more focused on developing skills and competencies. The private for-profit sector is playing an increasing role and nearly all providers are making use of ICTs and eLearning, some of them to teach across borders. At the same time we see the emergence of what we shall call 'post-traditional' higher education. New curricula and shorter qualifications attempt to address the crisis in the relationship between higher education and the labour market.

The striking feature of diversification is that these trends are highly inter-related. Discussing any one of them leads quickly to the others. It is rather like pulling on one noodle in an overcooked bowl of spaghetti. But you have to start somewhere, so I shall start with the developing role of technology in higher education, not because technology is determining the nature of changes in curricula and qualifications but because it is speeding up these changes.

There is a tendency to think of technology as a new phenomenon in higher education that started with the Internet. But technology has been transforming higher education for years. Even by the 1960s the blending of technologies had begun to offer universities a rich communications environment.

At the foundation ceremony of the UK Open University in 1969 the Chancellor, Lord Crowther, captured this in these words:

“The world is caught in a communications revolution, the effects of which will go beyond those of the industrial revolution of two centuries ago. Then the great advance was the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's muscles. Now the great new advance is the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's minds. As the steam engine was to the first revolution, so the computer is to the second.”

It is hard to overstate the impact of the UK Open University. Established with strong political support, it attracted worldwide attention. The OU slogan ‘open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods and open as to ideas’ encapsulates this.

Today the Open University has 250,000 enrolled students. Yet despite its size it ranks 5th, one place above Oxford, in national assessments of teaching quality. This slide is dated because in 2004 the elite universities, who hated this assessment of teaching, pleaded successfully with Prime Minister Blair to stop it! Note also, and this is remarkable when you think about it, the Open University came top in last year’s nation-wide assessment of students’ satisfaction with their universities and it has never come lower than third in this annual survey.

I conclude from the history of the Open University that you can use technology to deliver high-quality education to large numbers. By calling itself ‘open’, the university was primarily concerned to open up access to study by enabling people to learn at a distance and eliminating academic requirements for admission. But there are, of course, other ways of making higher education more open.

Opening up the curriculum

At the same time that the Open University opened, the great American educator Ernie Boyer, who was then Chancellor of the State University of New York, America’s largest university, set up Empire State College with the aim of opening up the curriculum. It allowed students to work with mentors to invent their own courses of study. Its slogan ‘my degree, my way’ captures this perfectly. Empire State College established the principle that with sound mentoring students could design credible programmes and courses for themselves.

Letting students do more to design their own curricula is not just a fancy liberal idea. New technology is unleashing a storm of ‘disruptive innovation’ that forces many workplaces to redesign jobs constantly. Higher education cannot adapt fast enough. Students alert to the changing world around them may be better than their universities at seeing opportunities and identifying the skills that they require to take advantage of them.

Since Empire State College enunciated the principle of ‘my degree, my way’ there has been an extraordinary multiplication in the tools that students can use for this purpose, most particularly Open Educational Resources.

Open Educational Resources (OER)

The notion of making academic content freely available for re-use and adaptation made news in the late 1990s when MIT started putting its lecturers' course notes on the Web. This was the extension to learning materials of the idealism that had already inspired open source software and open access to research materials.

UNESCO held a forum in 2002 to explore the implications of MIT's initiative for developing countries. The Forum coined the term Open Educational Resources defined them as educational materials that may be freely accessed, re-used, modified and shared. Ten years on, just over a year ago, UNESCO held a World Congress on OER. A set of recommendations on OER was developed and approved by acclamation at the Congress as the Paris Declaration. Its key recommendation – the punch line if you like – is to encourage the open licensing of educational materials produced with public funds.

There are signs that some governments are already taking the Paris Declaration and the economic benefits of OER seriously. For example, my own home province of British Columbia will now offer free, online open textbooks for the 40 most popular postsecondary courses.

Making sense of MOOCs

A direct development from Open Education Resources that has captured the attention of the media much more than OER themselves is MOOCs – Massive Open Online Courses. What are we to make of this phenomenon? Is it a nine months wonder or a harbinger of things to come? I suggest it is a bit of both. I start with some brief background.

A MOOC is a Massive Open Online Course. OER were the long fuse that detonated the MOOCs explosion. Most MOOCs are basically OER with some computerised assessment questions.

The University of Manitoba, Canada, first used the term MOOC for a course *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* in 2008. Two thousand members of the public took the course free online. But MOOCs really made news last year when elite American universities like Harvard, Stanford and MIT joined in.

I use the first MIT course, *Circuits and Electronics*, as an example. It was massive, attracting over 150,000 learners. It was open, meaning free and without admission requirements. It was online worldwide and attracted learners in 160 countries. You might question whether it was really a 'course' because if you passed the computerised tests you could buy a certificate of completion but you could not receive credit for use to study at MIT.

That was last year. Since then there has been a stampede to join the mooing MOOC herd. This is a copycat phenomenon. Few universities have a clear idea

of why they are offering MOOCs. Professor Tony Bates, the respected blogger on educational technology, predicts a shake out in MOOCs next year as evaluation results come in and financial officers start to ask harder questions about cost and benefit.

Meanwhile, with so many providers piling in to offer them, the definition of a MOOC has become much more fuzzy. One joker remarked that the meaning of every letter in the acronym MOOC is now negotiable! But in terms of the global economic and youth unemployment crises, this diversification is good. As MOOCs multiply they could reinforce some helpful trends. Many of those taking the early MOOCs already had university degrees, so they first provided informal professional development for well-qualified people.

Two things are needed to make MOOCs more widely useful. First, we need MOOCs in employment-related topics at all levels. Second, people need credible qualifications for successful study. Both are happening. The range of topics is diversifying fast and various bodies are giving recognition for MOOCs, even where they did not offer the course themselves.

At the beginning of next month I shall have the honour of presiding at the launch of the Open Education Resource university, OERu. This is a global consortium of institutions, although UNISA is the only African member so far. It is dedicated to helping students who want to do ‘my degree, my way’, by studying through OER, MOOCs, or in other ways to get tutorial support and proper recognition for their learning. This is an example of the wider trend of the ‘unbundling’ of higher education, with different organisations handling different parts of the process.

The impact of MOOCs

Let us note three trends that are being accelerated by MOOCs.

The first is the move to online learning. Until recently online learning, like the rest of distance learning, was thought to be of low quality. This was often simply a dogmatic belief held by traditionalists. I showed earlier, using the example of the UK Open University that, done properly, distance teaching can be of higher quality than classroom lecturing.

However, the rush of Harvard, MIT, Stanford and company into online learning has shaken the traditional belief that distance learning is inferior. Online teaching and learning is now part of the future of most universities. Nigeria should be very good at this because, without embarrassing you by pressing the point, I note that your country, through the 419 scams, is a world leader in the use of the Internet for less desirable purposes!

The second trend is towards shorter courses. Online courses work best – that is to say students succeed better – if they are between five and six weeks in duration. This favours intense concentration on a particular topic.

We also note a third, related trend. The qualifications that define the output of higher education are being put into new bottles.

New types of awards, such as Open Badges, are emerging. These badges, which are placed on the Web, carry more information about what was studied and how it was assessed than the usual university transcript. They allow learners to get recognition for short-cycle studies on economically relevant topics and to aggregate a series of badges into a conventional qualification such as a degree or a diploma.

What about quality?

A new challenge for higher education is to ensure the quality of these online offerings and any qualifications attached to them. Like the rest of higher education, quality assurance systems have to move with the times. I make two comments about that and here I am again indebted to Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić who is at the heart of these developments.

Guide to Quality in Online Learning

First, Academic Partnerships published a Guide to Quality in Online Learning earlier this year in English and Chinese as an OER. Copies are available to you here. I am pleased to say that this Guide was written here in Africa. Stamenka and I acted simply in the role of editors. It draws on good practice from all over the world.

This Guide addresses quality issues in formal online learning leading to qualifications, but the same team is now embarking on preparing a guide to the more informal types of learning, such as OERs and MOOCs, that I just mentioned. For want of a better term we are calling this ‘post-traditional’ higher education.

CHEA International Quality Group

In a second initiative, Stamenka is also the senior advisor on international affairs to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in the US. To address the quality issue she has helped CHEA to set up an International Quality Group, with membership open to institutions worldwide. Professor Peter Okebukola is one of the members of its distinguished advisory board, which has been recruited from all over the world.

One of its first tasks is to explore the creation of a ‘Quality Platform’ for the quality assurance of this ‘post-traditional’ higher education. These offerings, often online, do not fit easily into our traditional frameworks, either in the way they are offered or the way they are recognised. The International Quality Group is eager to have more members, both individuals and institutions, participating in its work. Please talk to Professor Okebukola if your institution is interested.

These are some of the trends stimulated by recent developments. We do not pretend that the trends that have been reinforced by MOOCs, such as online learning, shorter courses and new qualifications, provide universities' only answer to the global economic crisis. Nevertheless, the explosion of online learning is having unexpected and unintended consequences which may prove very helpful in the present circumstances.

Concluding remarks

These are some of the lessons that Nigerian universities can derive from observing how other higher education systems are responding, more or less successfully, to these turbulent times. But in concluding this address let me return to basics.

Here in Nigeria you have a movement dedicated to the elimination of western education – if not of education generally. I argued at the beginning of this lecture that western hegemony of higher education is vastly diminished. There is plenty of room to develop approaches to higher education that are authentically African and Nigerian. However, I suggest that two principles, one related to ends, the other to means, are universal and therefore central to higher education whether it is African, Asian, European or North American.

The first principle is simply the academic dogma that 'knowledge is important'. We call this a dogma because you can't prove it. It is an article of faith in academic life. To know is better than not to know. This belief that knowledge is important drives our research activities, our teaching and much of our community service. That is the principle related to ends or purposes.

The second principle, related to the first, is about means. How do we pass on to the next generation the belief that knowledge is important? We do it by cultivating in our students an attitude of systematic scepticism.

We must train all students to examine any statement critically, to assess the evidence for and against it, and to make up their own minds whether to accept the statement, reject it, modify it or develop it further.

I commend these two principles to you: 'knowledge is important' and 'inculcate an attitude of systematic scepticism'. As well as being the basis for academic life, the observance of these principles will help the Nigerian higher education system separate the wheat from the chaff as new developments come and go.

I wish you well in navigating Nigerian universities through today's turbulent waters and I thank you for the honour of addressing you on this important anniversary.