

AFRICAN COUNCIL FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION @20 SEMINAR REPORT



Transforming African Distance Education: Emerging Technologies, Institutional
Digitalisation and Quality Assurance

Hosted by University of South Africa

UNISA Muckleneuk Campus, Tshwane Kgorong Building, 4TH Floor

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1. Executive summary

The African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) convened its 20th Anniversary Seminar under the theme Transforming African Distance Education: Emerging Technologies, Institutional Digitalisation and Quality Assurance from 29 -30 January 2026 at the University of South Africa (UNISA), Muckleneuk Campus, Tshwane, South Africa. The Seminar marked a significant continental milestone, reflecting on two decades of advancing Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) across Africa and charting a strategic course for the future.

The event brought together university African leaders, policymakers, academics, development partners, students, and industry stakeholders to critically examine the evolving landscape of African distance education. Deliberations highlighted ACDE's transformation from a collaborative network into a recognised continental and global actor in quality assurance, policy engagement, and capacity development. Over the past 20 years, ACDE has strengthened the credibility of ODeL institutions, amplified African intellectual leadership, and expanded equitable access to higher education for disadvantaged and non-traditional learners.

Key reflections reaffirmed that ODeL is no longer a “pathway of last resort,” but a legitimate and, in many contexts, preferred mode of study. ACDE's flagship Quality Assurance Toolkit was recognised as a cornerstone achievement, contributing to harmonised standards, institutional strengthening, and improved credibility of African ODeL institutions.

The two-day seminar examined persistent challenges, including fragmented regulatory frameworks, digital infrastructure gaps, limited research output, funding constraints, and negative perceptions of ODeL quality. Participants underscored the urgency of harmonising accreditation systems, investing in sustainable funding models, strengthening student support ecosystems, retention, and closing the digital divide through inclusive, low-bandwidth and mobile-first solutions. The seminar concluded with a reflection of affirmations and areas of improvement necessary to successfully drive the ACDE into the next decade.

2. Introduction

The African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) convened its 20th Anniversary Seminar under the theme *Transforming African Distance Education: Emerging Technologies, Institutional Digitalisation and Quality Assurance*, held from 29 to 30 January 2026 at the University of South Africa, Muckleneuk Campus, Tshwane, South Africa. The Seminar marked a significant continental milestone, bringing together university leaders, policymakers, academics, researchers, development partners, and industry stakeholders to reflect on two decades of advancing Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) across Africa to engage critically with priorities shaping its future.

This Report presents a consolidated account of the key deliberations, insights, and recommendations arising from the Seminar. It captures reflections on ACDE's institutional journey, lessons learned from member institutions, and forward-looking perspectives on research, quality assurance, digital transformation, and continental collaboration. The Report further highlights cross-cutting themes and actionable recommendations intended to inform ACDE's strategic direction for the 2026-2030 period and to support member institutions in strengthening the equality, sustainability, and impact of distance education across the continent.

3. Opening Session and Key Reflections (Day 1)

3.1 Opening Ceremony

The opening session set a reflective and forward-looking tone for the ACDE 20th anniversary seminar, emphasising the strategic role of Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) in advancing equitable access to higher education across Africa. The session highlighted both the historical significance of ACDE's journey and the urgent imperatives shaping its future role. The role of Africa as a key player in contributing to new knowledge was affirmed. Over the next two days, as African institutions, we would map the way forward, developing contextualised solutions for our African problems.

3.2 Reflections by Prof. Puleng LenkaBula

ACDE Treasurer and Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of South Africa (Unisa)

Prof. Puleng LenkaBula emphasised that the University of South Africa remains attentive to the contextual realities and aspirations of African societies, particularly in relation to access, relevance, and transformation in higher education. She welcomed the ACDE Board and participants and commended the leadership of the ACDE President for steering the organisation in a manner that continues to promote accessible education across member countries.

She reflected on the resilience demonstrated by African education systems through the adoption of multimodal learning approaches, particularly during periods of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic and in the face of rapid advances in artificial intelligence. These developments, she noted, have reinforced the legitimacy and necessity of ODeL institutions as sustainable and credible alternatives within national higher education systems.

Marking the 20th anniversary of ACDE, Prof. LenkaBula highlighted the organisation's evolution into a continental movement. She highlighted the responsibility of academic leadership to ensure that socio-economic and political challenges within African countries do not derail the provision of education and called for renewed commitment to safeguarding Africa's intellectual capital, describing the continent's "brain trust" as fundamental to its future development. She raised concerns about the persistent under-financing of education across many African countries, challenging academics and institutions to innovate and augment available resources rather than wait passively for state support. In this context, she urged African universities to assert their relevance by placing education at the centre of national priorities and resisting tendencies to subordinate educational outcomes to political interests.

Prof. LenkaBula further stressed the importance of decolonising and Africanising knowledge systems as credible and necessary alternatives and called on African institutions to take pride in building and sustaining universities that serve continental development goals. She highlighted the transformative progress made by ODeL universities over the past two decades, noting increased research output and expanded impact, which have positioned ODeL institutions as universities of

choice rather than marginal alternatives. Prof LenkaBula affirmed that ODeL institutions have come a long way from being considered “universities of last resort” to being universities of choice.

Looking ahead, she raised critical questions about preparing students for a rapidly changing labour market shaped by artificial intelligence, citing examples from South Korea where AI has displaced traditional white-collar roles and automated manufacturing processes. She argued that coding and digital literacy should no longer be optional but embedded across school and university curricula. Prof LenkaBula encouraged African ODeL institutions to optimise the youthful dividend to ensure secured futures and societies. Through collaboration, she emphasised the importance of being relevant in our environments and co-creating ideas, insights and values that are useful. She concluded by affirming the need for collective action to ensure African universities remain relevant, future-oriented, and central to contextual transformation.

3.3 President's Address by Prof. Solomon Shibairo

ACDE President and Vice-Chancellor, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

Prof. Solomon Shibairo reaffirmed that ACDE’s 20th anniversary celebration provide a platform for their collective position to renew their resolve to ensure equitable access to Higher Education through Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) and continue its conviction on the principle that geography, circumstance or limitation should never be a barrier to education, a foundational value underpinning ACDE’s mandate. He traced ACDE’s institutional evolution, noting that the organisation was formally recognised through an observer status with the African Union Commission following decisions initiated in 2011 and affirmed in 2012, signalling continental endorsement of ACDE’s strategic role.

He highlighted ACDE’s leadership in teaching and learning, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields, and its growing global profile as a centre of excellence in distance education. Central to this leadership, he noted that has ACDE’s sustained focus on quality assurance and accreditation, which has strengthened standards across member institutions.

Prof Shibairo remarked that over the years, strengthening standards and credibility has been a strategic pillar for ACDE. Prof. Shibairo emphasised the development and rollout of the ACDE

Quality Assurance Toolkit, including the Training of Trainers programme, as a cornerstone of institutional capacity building. He encouraged all universities to utilise the toolkit and noted the planned review scheduled for 2026 as evidence of ACDE's commitment to continuous improvement and visionary leadership. He concluded by affirming that ACDE's legacy is reflected in tangible outcomes and observable transformation within the African higher education sector, positioning the organisation as a key driver of quality, innovation, and continental collaboration in ODeL.

3.4 Priority Calls to Action

- **Position ODeL as a strategic pillar of African higher education**, ensuring equitable access, resilience, and quality learning regardless of geography or disruption.
- **Accelerate digital and multimodal transformation**, embedding artificial intelligence, digital literacy, and future skills across curricula to prepare graduates for evolving labour markets.
- **Strengthen quality assurance and institutional capacity**, through continent-wide adoption and continuous improvement of the ACDE Quality Assurance Toolkit.
- **Safeguard Africa's intellectual capital and advance decolonised knowledge systems**, by investing in research, talent retention, and context-responsive scholarship.
- **Mobilise sustainable financing and partnerships**, leveraging innovation, diversified funding models, and continental collaboration to reduce reliance on constrained public resources.

4. Context and Background

4.1 Reflection on the significance of the 20-year milestone by Prof Olufemi Peters (ACDE 1st Vice-President, Vice-Chancellor of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)).

Prof. Olufemi Peters first highlighted that ACDE's 20-year celebration is not just another anniversary, but a continental celebration of purpose and resilience that reflects strong African intellectual leadership. It is a powerful reminder that access to higher education is possible, and that it has expanded over the years through the vision, collaboration, and commitment of African leaders themselves. This milestone should not be taken for granted but should be recognised and celebrated.

He further emphasised that the 20th anniversary affirms that Africans have solutions to their own challenges and realities. Open and distance learning institutions are often viewed as “the other,” but he called on stakeholders to rethink this perception. He urged ACDE and its members to respond boldly and strategically to Africa’s pressing problems. As a founding member of ACDE, Prof. Peters noted that member institutions did not merely join the organisation; they nurtured it. Over time, ACDE’s membership grew, and its visibility and impact increased. This progress was made possible by the support of Council and its clear mandate to advocate for accessible higher education across the continent.

Secondly, he argued that the 20-year milestone signals institutional maturity and credibility. ACDE has not only set precedents but has also influenced ODeL policy and standards, and, importantly, strengthened quality assurance. He reinforces that ACDE’s work has been a driver of equity and inclusion, expanding opportunities for disadvantaged communities that would otherwise have limited access to higher education.

Prof. Peters also stressed that artificial intelligence is now a reality. ODL institutions must adapt how learning is delivered, assessed and must strengthen governance frameworks to respond responsibly to digital transformation. He framed this milestone as an opportunity to move beyond celebration toward strategic renewal, positioning ACDE to lead with confidence and to help transform the next generation of learners.

In closing, he reminded delegates that this milestone is not merely ceremonial; it is a call for intergenerational stewardship and invites ACDE to reimagine its role not only in Africa, but globally, as evidence of what Africans can achieve when working together.

4.2 Remarks on the State and Future of ACDE by Prof. Teresa Mwoma, Executive Director, ACDE

Prof. Teresa Mwoma, began her remarks by acknowledging the collective effort that had gone into making the day’s event a success. She expressed appreciation to the University of South Africa (UNISA) for hosting the seminar, noting its significance as a pre-conference event ahead of the 8th ACDE Conference scheduled for 2027.

Reflecting on ACDE’s twenty-year journey, Prof. Mwoma described the milestone as a celebration of two decades of African leadership, collaboration, innovation, and unwavering commitment to expanding access to quality higher education through Open, Distance and eLearning (ODEL).

She paid tribute to the African higher education leaders and pioneers whose intellectual courage, foresight, and commitment laid the foundation for what ACDE has become today.

Prof. Mwoma observed that, over the past two decades, ACDE has embodied the spirit of Pan-Africanism by bringing African higher education institutions together around a common vision. Through the Council, Africa's voice within the regional and global knowledge landscape has been strengthened and amplified. She emphasised that the twentieth anniversary should therefore not be viewed merely as a commemoration of the passage of time, but as a celebration of vision, courage, partnership, and collective action.

Tracing the origins of the Council, Prof. Mwoma recalled that ACDE's journey began in the early 2000s, inspired by the spirit of the African Renaissance and a shared conviction among African vice-chancellors and higher education leaders that access to higher education could no longer be constrained by geography, limited physical infrastructure, or privilege. African leaders recognised the need to unite their efforts, pool resources and expertise, influence policy, and strengthen Africa's voice within the global higher education landscape. This shared vision ultimately provided the foundation upon which ACDE was established.

As the Council reflected on its achievements, Prof. Mwoma underscored the importance of also confronting its challenges with openness and honesty. She cautioned against interpreting institutional challenges as failures, noting that many of the challenges facing ACDE are equally experienced by other institutions and networks. Instead, such challenges should be understood as indicators of institutional growth and maturity and as opportunities to rethink approaches, strengthen systems, and position the organisation for the future.

Looking towards ACDE's third decade, Prof. Mwoma expressed optimism about the Council's future and called for a renewed commitment to positioning ACDE as a leading continental force in the transformation of African higher education. She encouraged the Council to take a leadership role in emerging global frontiers, particularly digital education, artificial intelligence, innovation, institutional digitalisation, and the continued transformation of ODeL.

She further envisioned ACDE becoming an increasingly trusted policy and knowledge hub for governments, higher education institutions, development partners, and other stakeholders seeking evidence and expertise on ODeL in Africa. Achieving this vision, however, would require renewed commitment and ownership from ACDE members, governments, development partners, the private sector, and other stakeholders.

Prof. Mwoma identified people, data, and investment in strong institutional systems as critical foundations for ACDE's future. She stressed the importance of building and retaining capable human resources, strengthening the generation and use of reliable evidence, and investing in systems capable of supporting a growing and increasingly influential continental organisation.

At the centre of these efforts, she emphasised, must be African realities and aspirations. The solutions developed and promoted through ACDE should respond to Africa's diverse contexts rather than simply replicating models developed elsewhere. Technology, innovation, policy, research, and institutional transformation should ultimately contribute to educational systems in which African learners, institutions, communities, and societies can thrive.

In concluding her remarks, Prof. Mwoma called upon African ODeL institutions and ACDE members to recommit themselves to the ideals that brought the Council together in 2004. As ACDE enters its third decade, its founding mission remains as relevant as ever: to expand access, strengthen quality, advance collaboration, amplify Africa's voice, and transform lives through Open, Distance and eLearning.

The twentieth anniversary therefore represents both a celebration of ACDE's achievements and a call to action. Building on two decades of experience, partnerships, and Pan-African collaboration, ACDE now has an opportunity to shape the next generation of open and digital higher education and position Africa not merely as a participant in the global transformation of education, but as a leader in defining its future.

5. Plenary and Thematic Sessions Summary

5.1 Plenary E at 20- Lessons Learned

5.1.1 Challenges

- **Fragmented regulatory environments:** Diverse national accreditation and quality assurance frameworks continue to constrain cross-border ODeL provision and limit portability of qualifications.
- **Perception of ODeL quality:** Despite progress, ODeL institutions are still sometimes viewed as secondary to conventional universities, affecting policy support and funding.
- **Resource constraints:** Uneven institutional capacity, limited funding, and infrastructure gaps have challenged consistent implementation of quality ODeL across member institutions.
- **Rapid technological change:** Keeping pace with digital transformation, AI, and new delivery models while ensuring quality and equity remains a persistent challenge.

5.1.2 Achievements

- **Institutional growth and consolidation:** ACDE has evolved from a small network into a recognised continental body representing ODeL institutions across Africa, with increased membership, visibility, and influence.
- **Quality Assurance leadership:** The development and rollout of the **ACDE Quality Assurance Toolkit (ACDE-QA Toolkit)** marked a major milestone, providing context-appropriate QA frameworks tailored to African ODeL realities. ACDE has supported member institutions in strengthening internal QA systems and engaging accreditation bodies.

- **Policy engagement and advocacy:** ACDE has contributed to shaping ODeL discourse, influencing national and regional policy conversations on access, quality, and innovation in higher education.
- **Capacity building and peer learning:** Through workshops, conferences, and technical support, ACDE has strengthened institutional capacity and fostered knowledge sharing among members.

5.1.3 Continental Impact

- **Expanded access to higher education:** ACDE's work has directly contributed to widening access for disadvantaged, rural, and working learners who would otherwise be excluded from higher education.
- **Strengthened credibility of African ODeL:** Through quality assurance initiatives and shared standards, ACDE has enhanced the legitimacy and recognition of ODeL institutions across the continent.
- **Catalysed partnerships:** ACDE has served as a convening platform for universities, governments, development partners, and international organisations, enabling collaborative responses to shared challenges.
- **Showcased member success stories:** Member institutions demonstrated impact through increased enrolments, innovative delivery models, regional collaborations, and contributions to workforce development and lifelong learning.
- **Pan-African knowledge leadership:** ACDE has amplified African voices in global higher education debates, reinforcing the principle that African institutions can generate solutions grounded in African contexts.

The plenary session affirmed that ACDE's 20-year journey reflects institutional maturity, resilience, and growing continental relevance. While challenges remain, ACDE's achievements in quality assurance, policy influence, and partnership-building position it as a central driver of equitable, credible, and future-oriented ODeL in Africa.

5.2 Thematic Session 2: Overcoming Persistent Challenges in ODeL

The thematic session on overcoming persistent challenges in Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) highlighted structural, technological, pedagogical, and systemic constraints that continue to limit the transformative potential of ODeL across Africa. Discussions emphasised that while

ODeL has expanded access, persistent challenges require coordinated, long-term, and context-responsive solutions anchored in African realities.

5.2.1 Digital Divide and ICT Infrastructure Gaps

Participants, mostly students underscored that unequal access to electricity, affordable internet connectivity, and digital devices remains the most significant barrier to equitable ODeL provision. Rural and marginalised communities are disproportionately affected, limiting learner participation, access to quality education and success. The session highlighted the need for low-bandwidth solutions, mobile-first platforms, offline and blended delivery models, and shared digital infrastructure. Strategic investment in national and regional ICT infrastructure, coupled with partnerships with governments and private sector actors, was identified as critical to closing the digital divide.

5.2.2 Student Support and Retention

Effective learner support was identified as central to improving retention and completion rates in ODeL institutions. Participants noted that many learners face socio-economic pressures, limited digital literacy, and isolation inherent in distance learning. The session emphasised the importance of integrated student support systems, including academic advising, psychosocial support, peer learning communities, and responsive helpdesks. Technology-enabled support, such as learning management systems, WhatsApp support, and AI-assisted tutoring, must however be aligned with learners lived realities and access constraints. These realities must be not overlooked but systems be put in place to support learners in every other way.

5.2.3 Quality Assurance and Accreditation

The session highlighted ongoing tensions between ODeL innovation and rigid regulatory and accreditation frameworks. Participants noted that while ODeL institutions are expanding access and experimenting with new delivery models, quality assurance systems often remain aligned to traditional, campus-based education. There was consensus on the need to strengthen context-appropriate quality assurance mechanisms, harmonise standards across countries, and advocate for regulatory reforms that recognise flexible learning pathways, micro-credentials, and cross-border provision without compromising academic integrity.

5.2.4 Funding Models and Sustainability

Unsustainable funding models were identified as a major constraint to scaling quality ODeL provision. Heavy reliance on tuition fees, donor funding, and short-term projects undermines long-term planning and system strengthening. The session called for diversified sustainable funding models that include public investment, development finance, competitive grants, and income-generating partnerships. Participants emphasised that ODeL should be recognised as a public good and strategically funded as part of national human capital development agendas. Furthermore, participants further highlighted that private funding from private companies need to come to party by providing funding these models.

5.2.5 Sustainable Partnerships

Participants stressed that overcoming persistent ODeL challenges requires moving beyond fragmented initiatives toward coordinated, long-term partnerships. Sustainable partnerships between universities, governments, development agencies, industry, and regional bodies were identified as essential for infrastructure development, capacity building, and policy alignment. Partnership needs to cut across African countries, and on a regional level. This will enable transfer of knowledge and learning lessons that can be implemented across the board. The session highlighted co-creation, shared accountability, and long-term system strengthening as key principles underpinning effective partnerships, and positioning ODeL as a driver of inclusive and resilient education systems.

Overall, the session reaffirmed that addressing persistent ODeL challenges demands collective action, policy coherence, and sustained investment. ACDE was recognised as a critical platform for convening stakeholders, shaping continental responses, and advancing equitable, high-quality ODeL across Africa.

5.3 Thematic Session 3: Innovations Transforming Distance Education in Africa

The thematic session on innovations transforming distance education in Africa showcased emerging technologies and pedagogical models that are reshaping Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL). Discussions emphasised that innovation must be context-aware, equity-driven,

and aligned to African realities to deliver meaningful impact. Often Western solutions take priority over African solutions created by their own people.

5.3.1 Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Learning

The session highlighted Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a transformative force in ODeL, with applications in personalised learning, automated assessment, learner analytics, and student support. AI-driven tools were presented as essential for scaling quality education in contexts of growing enrolments and limited academic staff. Participants emphasised that African institutions must move from being passive consumers of AI to active co-creators of Afrocentric AI models that reflect local data, languages, and learning behaviours. Strong governance frameworks and ethical considerations were identified as critical to responsible AI adoption.

5.3.2 Low-Data and Offline Technologies

Recognising persistent connectivity and electricity constraints, the session underscored the importance of low-data, mobile-first, and offline-capable learning solutions. Innovations such as downloadable content, offline learning management systems, SMS and WhatsApp-based support, and blended delivery models were identified as practical responses to the digital divide. Participants stressed that inclusive innovation requires designing for low bandwidth environments rather than assuming universal high-speed access.

5.3.3 Virtual Laboratories and Simulations

Virtual laboratories and simulations were presented as powerful tools for extending access to science, technology, engineering, and health programmes traditionally constrained by physical infrastructure. The session demonstrated that remote access to high-performance computing, simulations, and virtual experiments enables ODeL institutions to offer rigorous, practice-oriented programmes. These innovations were positioned as critical for building advanced skills and supporting research training across borders.

5.3.4 Micro-Credentials and Digital Badges

The session highlighted micro-credentials and digital badges as flexible learning pathways responding to skills mismatches, youth unemployment, and the demand for lifelong learning. Participants noted that micro-credentials enable learners to acquire targeted, market-relevant skills without committing to long qualification cycles. Digital badges were recognised as tools

for motivation, recognition of learning, and skills portability. The need for regulatory alignment and cross-border recognition was emphasised to unlock their full potential.

5.3.5 Open Educational Resources (OER) Models

Open Educational Resources were discussed as a cornerstone of equitable and cost-effective ODeL. The session highlighted OER's role in reducing learning material costs, supporting localisation of content, and fostering collaborative knowledge production across African institutions. Participants emphasised sustainable OER models that integrate quality assurance, institutional ownership, and capacity building, positioning openness as both a pedagogical and strategic imperative.

Overall, the session concluded that innovation in African distance education must prioritise inclusion, scalability, and relevance. By leveraging emerging technologies responsibly and collaboratively, ODeL institutions can expand access, enhance quality, and position Africa as a contributor to global knowledge and innovation.

6. DAY 2: Strategy, Partnerships and the Future

6.1 Opening Remarks by Prof. Puleng LenkaBula,

ACDE Treasurer & Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of South Africa (Unisa)

Prof Puleng Lenka Bula, extended warm greetings on behalf of the leadership of the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE), expressing appreciation to partners, stakeholders, and industry collaborators. She placed a great emphasis on the value of partnerships and the importance of mutual respect, collaboration, and continental solidarity in advancing Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) in Africa.

6.2 Building a continental ODeL Research Agenda- Remarks from Prof Isaiah Wakindiki (ACDE East Africa Regional Representative, CEO& Vice-Chancellor, KCA University, Kenya)

Prof Wakindi highlighted a critical imbalance between the rapid growth of distance education enrolments in Africa and the continent's limited contribution to global peer-reviewed research. While ODeL participation has grown exponentially over the past decade, African-generated research accounts for only a small proportion of global scholarly output. This gap weakens evidence-based policymaking, as many educational policies affecting Africa are informed by research produced outside the continent. He further drawn from the Association for the Development of Education in Africa, which emphasis on the urgency of strengthening African research leadership.

6.3 Evidence-based policy advocacy- Remarks from Dr Christopher Tshivhase (Acting Vice-Principle: Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support, University of South Africa).

Dr Tshivhase's presentation centred on the strategic importance of evidence-based policy in strengthening Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) across Africa. Drawing on extensive engagement with African higher education institutions, Dr Tshivhase reflected on the evolution of continental collaboration since the early 2000s and emphasised the role of the African Council for

Distance Education (ACDE) as a unifying platform for institutions delivering distance education. Dr Tshivhase placed his contribution within the broader context of ACDE's growth and maturity, noting that the universities, especially ODeL is now at a critical juncture where collaboration, rather than competition, must define its future trajectory.

6.3.1 Collaboration over competition in Higher Education

A central argument in Dr Tshivhase's presentation was the need for African ODeL institutions to move away from fragmented and competitive approaches toward structured collaboration. If ODeL institutions operated within similar socio-economic and policy environments rather than in isolation, duplicating efforts in curriculum development, research, and digital infrastructure. Dr Tshivhase argued that ACDE provides a strategic opportunity to consolidate efforts, harmonise approaches, and speak with a unified continental voice on distance education. Such collaboration would significantly enhance Africa's influence in global higher education policy debates and reduce inefficiencies caused by institutional silos.

6.3.2 Evidence-based policy as a driver of Systemic change

The presentation strongly advocated for the use of rigorous, contextually grounded evidence to inform policy and practice. Dr Tshivhase highlighted that many policy decisions in African higher education are still driven by assumptions, historical models, or externally generated evidence that does not adequately reflect African realities. He stressed that ODeL institutions have a greater chance of evidence-based policies that will be anchored in African-generated data and research, ensuring that decisions on access, quality, funding, and digital transformation are informed by local contexts. This approach, he argued, is essential for achieving sustainable and equitable educational outcomes.

6.3.3 Digital Transformation beyond technology adoption

Dr Tshivhase cautioned against narrow interpretations of digital transformation that focus solely on moving programmes online. He emphasised that true digital transformation requires systemic thinking, including changes to institutional culture, governance, pedagogy, and quality assurance. Reflecting on lessons from the COVID-19 period, he noted that many institutions adopted emergency remote teaching without adequately rethinking curriculum design, assessment practices, or student support systems. While these measures ensured continuity, they also exposed deep inequalities in access and preparedness, underscoring the need for long-term, evidence-informed digital strategies.

6.3.4 Quality Assurance and Policy Harmonisation

The presentation highlighted persistent challenges related to quality assurance and regulatory alignment across African higher education systems. Dr Tshivhase referenced experiences where promising academic programmes were constrained by misaligned qualification frameworks and regulatory requirements.

He advocated for greater harmonisation of quality assurance regimes across countries and institutions, arguing that ACDE is well positioned to facilitate dialogue among regulators, universities, and policymakers. Harmonised frameworks would enhance student mobility, institutional credibility, and cross-border collaboration in ODeL provision.

6.3.5 Student Success as the core measure of impact

Dr Tshivhase emphasised that institutional success should not be measured solely by enrolment growth or financial sustainability, but by student success, retention, and completion. He called for the systematic use of learning analytics and student data to inform interventions aimed at improving outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged and non-traditional learners. He further argued that institutions should openly share effective practices through ACDE platforms, enabling collective learning and continuous improvement across the continent.

6.3.6 Open education resources and shared infrastructure

Another key theme was the strategic use of Open Educational Resources (OERs). Prof Tshivhase proposed that African institutions collaborate in the development and sharing of learning materials, rather than duplicating content development efforts. Shared OER initiatives, he suggested, would reduce costs, improve quality, and promote inclusivity. This approach aligns with broader goals of public good-oriented education, positioning higher education as a driver of social mobility and development rather than purely a market-driven enterprise.

6.3.7 Positioning ACDE within continental and global agendas

In conclusion, Dr Tshivhase linked evidence-based policy advocacy to broader continental development frameworks, particularly Agenda 2063. He urged ACDE and its member institutions

to act with urgency, agility, and strategic clarity to ensure that ODeL contributes meaningfully to “the Africa we want.”

He emphasised that Africa must not only consume global knowledge but actively generate and shape it, ensuring that African evidence informs African policies. Through strengthened research, collaboration, and evidence-based practice, ACDE can play a transformative role in positioning African ODeL institutions as leaders in global higher education.

6.4 Thematic Session 3: Building Sustainable ODeL Ecosystems

The session on Building Sustainable ODeL Ecosystems highlighted the critical role of strategic partnerships, robust digital infrastructure, and platform integration in ensuring the long-term viability of open, distance and e-learning across Africa. Contributions from global partners and technology providers emphasized cloud-based learning environments, scalable digital platforms, cybersecurity, data governance, and interoperable systems that can support large and diverse student populations. The discussion underscored that sustainability extends beyond technology to include institutional capacity, policy alignment, and public-private collaboration. Speakers stressed the importance of resilient ICT ecosystems, locally adaptable solutions, and long-term partnerships that enable African institutions to modernise delivery while maintaining affordability and accessibility. The session culminated the following key points:

1. Pan-African Leadership and Collective Vision

ACDE is a powerful symbol of Pan-African collaboration and collective leadership. Through integrated and cooperative systems, African institutions are shaping the higher education agenda, amplifying African voices, and advancing home-grown solutions. This collective vision reflects trust in African intellectual capacity and a commitment to integration rather than competition.

2. Transformation of Access Through ODeL

ACDE plays a pivotal role in transforming and expanding equitable access to higher education through Open, Distance and eLearning. ODeL is no longer a pathway of last resort but a credible and, in many cases, preferred mode of study, particularly for disadvantaged, rural, working, and non-traditional learners, ensuring that geography and circumstance are no longer barriers to learning.

3. Continental Leadership in Quality Assurance

ACDE's continental leadership in quality assurance, particularly through the development and rollout of the Quality Assurance Toolkit. This flagship initiative moves quality assurance beyond compliance toward quality enhancement, strengthens credibility, harmonises standards across African contexts, and positions ODeL institutions as universities of choice built on trust and accountability

4. Resilience, Innovation, and Adaptability

The resilience, adaptability, and innovation demonstrated by ACDE and its member institutions over more than two decades. In responding to disruptions such as COVID-19, rapid digitalisation, and emerging technologies, African institutions have reclaimed their intellectual agency - shifting from knowledge consumption to knowledge creation and co-creation - and confirming ODeL as a sustainable, future-ready mode of education.

5. Growing Global and Policy Influence

ACDE's evolution from a collaborative network into a recognised continental and global actor. Through policy engagement, regulatory dialogue, strategic partnerships, capacity development, and contributions to global higher education discourse, ACDE continues to shape forward-looking policies that respond to Africa's youth dividend, geopolitical realities, and changing skills demands.

7. Strategic Actions Emerging from the Reflections

- **Reposition ACDE as a Continental and Global Policy and Thought Leader**
Strengthen ACDE's role as a trusted Pan-African policy hub for ODeL by shaping standards, influencing policy, and amplifying African intellectual leadership globally. This includes coordinated engagement with governments, regulators, and international partners to ensure African realities inform higher education futures.
- **Drive Strategic Digital Transformation and Responsible AI Adoption in ODeL**
Move beyond celebration toward strategic renewal by embedding digital education and artificial intelligence into teaching, assessment, learner support, and governance. This

requires investments in people, data, and systems, with a clear focus on equity, quality assurance, and relevance to African socio-economic contexts.

- **Renew Collective Commitment to Equity, Inclusion, and Access Through ODeL**
Reaffirm ACDE's founding mandate to expand equitable access to higher education by pooling resources, deepening collaboration among member institutions, and prioritising disadvantaged communities. ODeL universities must recommit to transforming lives through context-responsive solutions that address Africa's persistent access and inclusion challenges.

The following section summarises key strengths (affirmations) observed within the ACDE, together with identified areas requiring further attention to support continuous improvement into the next decade.

8. Affirmations for ACDE:

1. Pan-African Leadership and Collective Vision

Over the past two decades, ACDE has been powerful symbol of Pan-African collaboration and collective leadership. Through integrated and cooperative systems, African institutions are shaping the higher education agenda, amplifying African voices, and advancing home-grown solutions. In the ODeL context, ACDE has played a key role in amplifying African voices and advancing homegrown solutions. This collective vision reflects trust in African intellectual capacity and a commitment to integration rather than competition.

2. Transformation of Access Through ODeL

ACDE plays a pivotal role in transforming and expanding equitable access to higher education through Open, Distance and eLearning. ODeL is no longer a pathway of last resort but a credible and, in many cases, preferred mode of study, particularly for disadvantaged, rural, working, and non-traditional learners, ensuring that geography and circumstance are no longer barriers to learning. ACDE-affiliated institutions have played a meaningful role in providing accessible, quality education and have reshaped perspectives on distance education. This has meant that education in Africa is far-reaching, impactful, and accessible.

3. Continental Leadership in Quality Assurance

ACDE's continental leadership in quality assurance, particularly through the development and rollout of the Quality Assurance Toolkit. This flagship initiative moves quality assurance beyond compliance toward quality enhancement, strengthens credibility, harmonises standards across African contexts, and positions ODeL institutions as universities of choice built on trust and accountability. The ACDE has done well in developing quality frameworks tailored for African ODeL contexts. This has created a shared level of trust and credibility for ODeL institutions in Africa.

4. Resilience, Innovation, and Adaptability

The resilience, adaptability, and innovation demonstrated by ACDE and its member institutions over more than two decades has contributed significantly to affirming ACDE as agile and ahead of its time. In responding to disruptions such as COVID-19, rapid digitalisation, and emerging technologies, African institutions have reclaimed their intellectual agency -shifting from knowledge consumption to knowledge creation and co-creation -and confirming ODeL as a sustainable, future-ready mode of education.

5. Growing Global and Policy Influence

ACDE's evolution from a collaborative network into a recognised continental and global actor. Through policy engagement, regulatory dialogue, strategic partnerships, capacity development, and contributions to global higher education discourse, ACDE continues to shape forward-looking policies that respond to Africa's youth dividend, geopolitical realities, and changing skills demands.

9. Areas of Strengthening (Looking Forward to the Next Decade)

1. Harmonisation of Regulatory and Accreditation Frameworks

A key constraint facing ODeL in Africa is the fragmentation of regulatory and quality assurance systems across countries, which limits credit transfer, joint programme delivery, and cross-border recognition of qualifications. Divergent accreditation standards slow innovation and increase

compliance costs for institutions seeking continental reach. ACDE can play a catalytic role by promoting regional accreditation frameworks, mutual recognition agreements, and shared quality benchmarks aligned with continental bodies such as the African Union and regional economic communities. Establishing a continental ODeL quality assurance framework and strengthening the ACDE-QA toolkit would support trust, mobility, and the scaling of cross-border programmes.

2. Closing the Digital Divide Through Inclusive Design

ODeL learning environment continues to be undermined by unequal access to devices, connectivity, electricity, and digital literacy, thereby excluding large segments of students, particularly in rural and low-income communities. If unaddressed, digital transformation risks deepening educational and gender inequality. ODeL institutions across the continent should adopt inclusive design principles by expanding low-bandwidth and offline learning solutions, mobile-first platforms, multilingual interfaces, and universal design for accessibility for academics and students with different abilities. ACDE-led partnerships with governments and telecom providers can support zero-rated educational content and community learning hubs, while digital literacy programmes can empower students to fully participate in ODeL environments. In addition, ODeL institutions should promote context-appropriate educational technologies, that would suite the African environment and be understood by African scholars.

3. Sustainable Funding and Resource Mobilisation

Financial sustainability remains a persistent challenge, with many institutions dependent on unstable public funding and donor support. The high costs of digital infrastructure, platform maintenance, and student support services place strain on institutional budgets. ACDE institutions should diversify funding streams through blended financing models that include public investment, development finance, private sector partnerships, and revenue from micro-credentials and professional programmes. This can also be done through designing funding instruments, such as bonds for public good, through development financing institutions. Shared services, regional procurement models, and open-source technologies can reduce costs, while demonstrating the socio-economic returns of ODeL can strengthen advocacy for sustained public funding.

4. Student Support, Retention, and Success

High attrition rates in distance education reflect inadequate academic support, digital readiness gaps, and limited psychosocial support structures. Many students, especially women, balance employment, family responsibilities, and connectivity challenges, which undermines persistence and completion rates. Institutions should invest in proactive student support ecosystems, creating an enabling environment that include early warning systems, academic advising, peer mentoring, virtual tutoring, mental health services, and flexible assessment pathways. Policies and strategies observation must be on the forefront to drive student support and retention. Data analytics can help identify at-risk students, while community-based support centres can provide localised assistance and strengthen retention.

5. Strategic Leadership in Responsible AI and Digital Transformation

While artificial intelligence and digital technologies present transformative opportunities for personalised learning, automated assessment, and administrative efficiency, many institutions lack governance frameworks, ethical guidelines, and technical capacity to deploy them responsibly. Without strategic leadership, AI adoption may exacerbate bias, privacy risks, and academic integrity concerns. ACDE has an opportunity as a leader in ODeL to lead and invest catalytic research in areas of development and deployment of responsible AI tools. ACDE should also lead in developing continental guidelines for responsible AI in education, promote capacity building for academic and administrative leaders, and encourage collaborative research on AI-driven pedagogies and epistemologies. Strategic leadership must ensure that digital transformation remains human-centred, ethically grounded, and aligned with inclusive development goals with a whole of government, whole of economy, and whole of society approaches.

ACDE has the opportunity to develop leadership programmes, not only for the current leaders but also for future leaders. Young academics must start participating early within ACDE to strengthen institutional capacity design and academic development. This will build a sustainable professional development pathway for ACDE and ensure that no one is left behind. Furthermore, ACDE must

encourage continental collaboration between young scholars to ensure that ACDE remains resilient, inclusive, sustainable and future oriented.

10. Conclusion

The 20th Anniversary Seminar of the African Council for Distance Education marked a celebration of institutional maturity and a call to strategic renewal. Over the past two decades, ACDE has shifted perspectives, demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and continental leadership in advancing equitable access to higher education through Open, Distance and e-Learning.

During this two-day seminar, ACDE stood at a pivotal moment of reflecting on the power of Pan-African collaboration over the past twenty years and preparing for a future of greater demands for integration, stronger knowledge contribution, harmonised quality assurance systems, and sustainable financing models.

The next decade must build on the foundations laid, moving from reflection to action, from collaboration to integration, and from continental influence to global leadership. The ACDE must remain steadfast in its mandate to safeguard Africa's intellectual capital, amplify African scholarship, and transform lives through accessible, credible, and context-responsive education. Africa should continue to look within for solutions to its problems and remain committed to making a meaningful contribution in global knowledge.

This rapporteur report reflects observations and interpretation of insights by a cohort of UNISA young academics committed to learning, making a contribution and creating the Africa we want.

ANNEX

Programme Outline

DAY 1: 29 January 2026

Official Opening & Reflections on ACDE

Programme Director: Prof Meahabo Magano, Executive Director: Tuition and Facilitation of Learning

TIME	ITEM	FACILITATOR/PARTICIPANTS
08:00 – 08:30	Arrival and Registration	
09:00 – 09:30 Opening Ceremony		
09:00 – 09:20	Opening and Welcome	Prof. Puleng LenkaBula, ACDE Treasurer & Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of South Africa (Unisa)
09:20 – 09:40	President's Address	Prof. Solomon Shibairo, ACDE President & Vice-Chancellor of Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya
09:40 – 10:45 Context and Background		
09:40 – 10:00	Reflection on the significance of the 20-year milestone	Prof Olufemi Peters, ACDE 1st Vice-President, Vice-Chancellor, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)
10:00 – 10:20	Remarks on the State and Future of the ACDE	Prof Teresa Mwoma, ACDE Secretary General, Kenyatta University

TIME	ITEM	FACILITATOR/PARTICIPANTS
10:20– 10:30 A multimedia presentation of ACDE’s milestones (2005–2025)		
10:30 – 11:30 Plenary Session 1: ACDE at 20—Lessons Learned		
Facilitator - Prof. Elifas Bisanda, Former ACDE 2ND Vice-President, Immediate Former Vice-Chancellor, Open University of Tanzania		
10:30 – 11:30	Challenges, Achievements, and Continental Impact Discussion Focus • Growth and evolution of ACDE • QA contributions (ACDE-QA Toolkit, accreditation work) • Partnerships and policy influence • Member success stories	Panellists: • Prof. Paul Gundani, ACDE Southern Africa Regional Representative, Vice-Chancellor, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) • Prof. Kgomotso Moahi, Vice-Chancellor of Botswana Open University (BOU) • Prof. Dorothy Ofoha, ACDE Director, Quality Assurance and Accreditation, Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) • Prof. Alex Makulilo,

TIME	ITEM	FACILITATOR/PARTICIPANTS
		2nd ACDE Vice President & Vice Chancellor, Open University of Tanzania (OUT)
11:30 – 12:00 Tea Break		
Thematic Session 2: Overcoming Persistent Challenges in ODeL: Facilitator: Prof Peter Mutanho, ACDE Strategist, Executive Director, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)		
12:00 – 13:10	Focus Areas: - Digital divide and ICT infrastructure gaps - Student support and retention - Quality assurance and accreditation - Funding models and sustainability - Sustainable Partnerships	Panellists - ODeL Learning Systems: Prof. Deus Ngaruko, ACDE Director, Technical Committee on Collaboration, Open University of Tanzania - Funding Models: Prof. Kennedy Mbekeani, Chief Regional Integration Officer at the African Development Bank Group/ Mr Babatunde Olumide Omilola: Manager for Public Health, Security and Social Protection Division, African Development Bank - Development Partnerships: Mr Carlton Mukwevho: Secretary-General, South African Commission for UNESCO
13:10 – 13:40 Lunch Break		
Thematic Session 3: Innovations Transforming Distance Education in Africa: Facilitator: Prof. Jegede Olugbemiro: Former ACDE President, National Open University of Nigeria		

TIME	ITEM	FACILITATOR/PARTICIPANTS
13:40 – 14:40	Topics: - Artificial Intelligence and virtual learning, - Low-data / offline technologies, - Virtual laboratories and simulations, - Micro-credentials and digital badges, - Open Educational Resources (OER) models,	Presenters: Astrophysics, Space Sciences and Artificial Intelligence – African Partnership Imperatives, Prof. James Chibueze, Distinguished Professor, Centre for Astrophysics & Space Sciences, University of South Africa ODEL Digitalisation and Student Support, Dr. J.A. Lazaro, ACDE Director, Information and Communication Technology, Universidade Aberta ISCED (UnISCED), Mozambique Micro-credentials and digital badges, Prof. Mpine Makoe, Former ACDE Database Project and Executive Dean, University of South Africa (Unisa) Discussion: Q/A
14:40 – 16:00	SADC Vice-Chancellors Forum	Prof. Puleng LenkaBula , ACDE Treasurer & Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of South Africa (Unisa)
14:40 – 15:40	Online M&D Student Session	Facilitators – Virtual Session Prof. Silindile Ngubane, ACDE Director, Knowledge Generation, Dissemination and Advocacy, University of South Africa Prof Tennyson Mgutshini,

TIME	ITEM	FACILITATOR/PARTICIPANTS
		Executive Dean: College of Graduate Studies, University of South Africa
18:30 – 21:00 Gala Dinner: Protea Hotel Fire and Ice Hotel by Marriott: ANNIVERSARY REFLECTION: ACDE THROUGH THE YEARS Programme Director: Professor Edith Dinong Phaswana, Acting Executive Dean, Thabo Mbeki African School of Public and International Affairs (Unisa)		
18:00 – 18:10	Arrival Music	
18:10 – 18:20	A multimedia presentation of ACDE's milestones (2005–2025).	Multimedia services
18:20 – 18:30	Welcome Address	Dr Matsheliso Molapo, Acting Vice-Principal: Strategy, Risk and Advisory Services, University of South Africa
18:30 -18:40	Local host Address	Prof. Puleng LenkaBula, ACDE Treasurer & Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of South Africa (Unisa)
18:40 – 18:50	A brief journey of ACDE	Prof. Olufemi Peters, ACDE 1st Vice-President, Vice-Chancellor, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

TIME	ITEM	FACILITATOR/PARTICIPANTS
18:50 – 19:00	President's Address	Prof. Solomon Shibairo, ACDE President & Vice-Chancellor of Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya
19:00- 19:30	Keynote Address	Prof. Sarah A. Agbor, Former AU Commissioner for ESTI, AUC, Inspector of Administration MINESUP, Forum for Innovation in African University (FIAU) Vice-Chair, FAWE AFRICA, FAWE CAM, Trustee Board member, UNITAR
Dinner and Music		
19:30 - 19:40	Vote of Thanks:	Prof Solomon Magano, Vice-Principal: Institutional Advancement, University of South Africa
Musical Entertainment		

DAY 2: 30 JANUARY 2026

Strategy, Partnerships and the Future

Programme Director: Prof A W Gunter, Acting Deputy Executive Dean: College of Agriculture & Environmental Sciences, University of South Africa

TME	ITEM	FACILITATOR/PARTICIPANTS
09:00 – 10:30	Thematic Session 3: Strengthening Research, Policy, and Continental Collaboration	

TME	ITEM	FACILITATOR/PARTICIPANTS
09:00 – 09:20	Building a continental ODeL research agenda,	Prof Isaiah Wakindiki , ACDE East Africa Regional Representative, CEO & Vice-Chancellor, KCA University, Kenya
09:20 – 09:40	Evidence-based policy advocacy,	Dr Christopher Tshivhase , Acting Vice-Principal: Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support, University of South Africa
09:40 – 10:00	Research, Innovation & Societal Impact, Researchers from leading ODeL universities	Dr. Omobolaji Oyededeji , Director, Academic Services of the National Teachers' Institute (NTI), Kaduna, Nigeria (Online)
10:00 – 10:30	Discussion Q&A	
10:30 – 11:00 Tea Break		
Thematic Session 3: Building Sustainable ODeL Ecosystems Facilitator: Ms Mathabo Nakene, Vice Principal ICT and Chief Information Officer, UNISA		
11:00 – 12:30	Building Sustainable ODeL Ecosystems	Panellists Commonwealth of Learning, Canada, Prof. Peter Scott , President and Chief Executive Officer (recorded message) Overview by Infotech, Virtual presentation, Mr Mark Hoeting

TME	ITEM	FACILITATOR/PARTICIPANTS
		Huawei: Mr Kim Jinyuzhuo Oracle: Ms Bibi Goba/Mr Imran Aziz/ Mr Brent Samuel Microsoft: Ms Samantha Malapane
12:30 – 13:30 Lunch		
13:30 – 14:30 Closing Ceremony		
13:30 – 14:00	Keynote Address: Charting the Next 20 Years: A Vision for African Universities	Prof Kenneth Matengu, Vice-Chancellor: University of Namibia, President: Association of African Universities, President: Pan-African University Council, Member of the Council: Association of Commonwealth Universities.
14:00 – 14:15	Closing Remarks: President's Address:	Prof. Solomon Shibairo, ACDE President & Vice-Chancellor of Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya
14:15 – 14:30	Vote of Thanks	Prof. Puleng LenkaBula, ACDE Treasurer & Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of South Africa (Unisa)
14:30 – 14:35	Announcements: Programme Director	
ACDE Board Members Closed Session: Presentation of the 2026-2030 Strategy		

TME	ITEM	FACILITATOR/PARTICIPANTS
14:30- 17:00		Facilitator – Prof. Teresa Mwoma, ACDE Executive Director, Kenyatta University Presenters: Dr Matsheliso Molapo, Acting Vice-Principal: Strategy, Risk and Advisory Services, University of South Africa Mr Bryton Masiye, Director: Strategy and Planning, University of South Africa¹
18:00 Refreshments: Winnie Midikizela-Mandela Building		
18:30 – 21:00 The 7 th International Voice Competition: Finals & Dinner ZK Matthews Hall, Unisa Muckleneuk Campus, Tshwane		