Contextual Content Analysis of Mission Statements of Open and Distance Education Institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa

MPINE MAKOE (iD)

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to evaluate the extent to which open, and distance education universities are fulfilling their stated purpose as higher education institutions in Sub-Saharan countries. The starting point of understanding the purpose of an institutions is to analyse the content of mission statements and the context in which the universities operate. The content of the mission statements of the six selected open and distance universities from Sub-Saharan countries were analysed using contextual content analysis. The role of mission statements is to communicate the purpose of the institution to stakeholders. Although most open and distance universities mentioned some of the principles of openness, many mission statements were silent on access, equity and student-centredness. The findings revealed that there is misalignment between what the university claims to do and their practice. This shows that these institutions did not consider the open and distance education principles and context when developing mission statements.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Mpine Makoe

University of South Africa, ZA

qakisme@unisa.ac.za

BACKGROUND

Increasing participation in higher education is a major policy issue in many African countries. Virtually every national education policy and development plans of different countries in Africa outlines strategies of addressing issues of access and participation in higher education (Biao, 2012; Makoe, 2018; Mukama, 2016). In search of an alternative implementation agent to address this need, most countries in Sub-Saharan countries identified open and distance education as the most viable delivery system that will assist them to effectively train large numbers of people at low costs. The choice of open and distance education is premised on practices, systems and structures that promotes access to learning to accommodate many students from diverse backgrounds (Bates, 2015). This need is even more acute in Sub-Saharan Africa where there are problems with financial affordability; low levels of academic readiness and lack of education capital (Makoe, 2016; Pechenkina et al., 2011). However, people in these countries need higher education qualifications to perform in the knowledge economy.

Studies have shown that countries with high participation rates in higher education also have high economic growth (Altbach at el., 2009; Pechenkina et al., 2011). Most highly resources developed countries have higher education participation rates of more than 50% while many least developed countries is Sub-Saharan African countries have less than 5% of people who partake in higher education (Altbach et al., 2009; Khuluvhe et al., 2021). Even South Africa, with a participation rate of 21%, the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is still substantially below average as compared to other middle-income countries which stood at 36% (Khuluvhe et al., 2021). According to the South African National Development Plan (NDP) target, the participation rate for South Africa should increase to 27% if it is to realize the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 4 (RSA, 2012). Most Sub-Saharan countries are acutely aware that they may not reach the SDG-4: "towards an inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all" because of the persistent low number of people who are partaking and those who have graduated from higher education institutions. Many African countries have not provided education at a high scale. Open and distance universities are well equipped to widen participation in higher education because they are guided by the concepts of openness (an approach to education) and distance (its delivery mode) as their identity. These two concepts enable ODL institutions to provide education that can be accessed everywhere and anytime. What separates ODL institutions from all other traditional education institutions is that the former are guided by the following principles: Quality, Lifelong Learning, Flexibility, Accessibility, Equitability, Development, Cost Effectiveness, and Students Centredness (DHET, 2017).

Accomplishing this much needed goal of widening participation in higher education requires open and distance education institutions to lead the way by ensuring that education that is produced through public funds is made accessible at reduced costs. Open and distance education institutions are therefore established to provide an unprecedented opportunity to increase student access at affordable costs. Despite the dire need to increase access to higher education at a large scale in Sub-Saharan African countries, there are only six publicly funded open and distance universities: The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), University of South Africa (UNISA), Open University of Tanzania (OUT), Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), Botswana Open University (BOU), and Open University of Mauritius (OUM). The mission statements of these universities will be analyzed in relation to open and distance learning principles that are central to the to the social justice mandate of equity, access and quality (Hodgkinson-William & Trotter, 2018).

The aim of this study is to evaluate the extent to which open and distance education universities are fulfilling their stated purpose as higher education institutions in Sub-Saharan countries. The starting point of finding out the purpose of an institution is to analyse the content of mission statements and the context in which it operates. The mission statements were chosen as units of analysis because they are "seen as the organization's life blood or their raison d'être … that ideally encapsulates the essence of what any organization strives to achieve" (Holosko et al., 2015, p. 10). In a nutshell mission statements describes what the organization does; how does it do it and what makes it unique (Hartley, 2002; Holosko et al.,

2015; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). These prominent statements also provide guidance towards the successful implementation of institutions' strategy that ensures that open education initiatives are supported. However, many African countries are still struggling with addressing high illiteracy rates, massive demand for higher education, glaring digital divide and huge capacity development needs. The African Union recognises the benefits of open education in increasing participation and access to higher education. Hence, open and distance education institutions' missions especially in Sub-Saharan Africa should include factors that address the development agenda of African nations; their unique positioning in the higher education sector as well as their commitment to addressing the social justice mandate (Lambert, 2018). Open and distance education universities in particular are aptly positioned to address historical institutionalised injustice (Hodgkinson-William & Trotter, 2018; Lambert, 2018). Therefore, the mission statements should be driven by the content elements that are finding expressions in what open and distance universities were established for and how they are achieving their mandate. Distance education universities owe their success to their mission of providing access to communities who could not or were excluded from accessing higher education (Tait, 2008).

MISSION STATEMENTS

This study focuses on mission statements because they "reflect the realities of the institutions' environment" (Hartley, 2002, p. 85) in relation to the physical, social, economic and political context of the institution. Therefore, mission statements tend to be influenced by the past as well as the present contextual issues. A mission statement aims to articulate the "sense of purpose and has the capacity to inspire and motivate those within an institution and to communicate its characteristics, values, and history to key external constituents" (Morphew & Hartley, 2006, p. 457). The first step of developing a strategy for the university is to respond to the vision and the mission statements of the university. A vision helps to predict the future while the mission describes the purpose and guides the operations of the institution (Özdem, 2011). These statements contribute to the identity and the purpose of the institution.

Studies that have examined mission statements of colleges and university indicated that mission statements are of critical importance because they describe to the public and stakeholders the role of the institution or organisations (Atkinson, 2008; Bart et al., 2001; Delucchi, 2000; Hartley, 2002; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Özdem, 2011). In examining the mission statements of liberal arts colleges in the United States, Delucchi (2000) found that 70% of mission statements of colleges demonstrated a "distinct difference between the actions the institutions are promoting, which are often driven by societal pressures, and the actual work that is occurring to operate the organization on a day-to-day basis." This is similar to what Morphew and Hartley (2006) found when they examined the content of 300 college and university mission statements. Their research revealed that mission statements are more political statements that reflect specific stakeholder interests than what the universities are doing (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Atkinson (2008) also found that mission statements are framed in ways particular to their own political, social, and institutional context. This focus on the external factors tend to neglect the operations of the institutions. Although mission statements are meant to provide the reason for the existence of an institution, Bart et al. (2001) study revealed that most mission components have no direct link with performance, specifically financial performance. "A positive relationship between mission statement contents and organisational performance … is likely to guide universities on their way to excellence" (Holosko et al., 2015).

Mission statements are meant to guide strategic planning, the values and communicate the distinct personality of an institution. By and large institutions of higher education share common missions of teaching and learning, research and community service. However, each university is different from the other in terms of structures and systems that supports its operations. The degree to which the structures, systems and procedures are aligned to the mission influences employee's behavior (Bart et al., 2001). Mission statement play a critical role in influencing actions and behavior of employees towards a common goal for the institution (Bart et al., 2001; Holosko et al., 2015). These statements assist university' employees to understand the guiding values that inform the university's mission and purpose. Bart et al. (2001) therefore, concluded

that mission statements should be aligned to performance in order to contribute effectively to the performance of the institution. Thus, it is important to recognize the underlying values and culture of the university and to realize the applicability of the university's mission statements in relation to their context.

Although many studies have focused mainly on the content of the mission statements, Tait's (2013) study looked at the reason why open and distance teaching universities were created and what they claim to do. Analysing mission statements of 12 major open and distance teaching universities in the world, Tait (2013) found that the majority of institutions which were both from developing and developed countries claimed equity and equality as their goals. The underlying discourse in almost all the mission statements were developmental in nature, however some practices are not in line with the development agenda that they purport to support (Tait, 2013).

CONTENT OF MISSION STATEMENTS

In this study, the content of the mission statements of the six selected universities' from Sub-Saharan countries will be analysed in relation to the context in which the words emerged. Content analysis was used to analyse the existence, implications and associations of concepts and words (Krippendorff, 2004) while contextual analysis will be utilized to construct the interpretation of the mission statements in relation to the history and social context. Although content analysis derive facts from the text as presented in the form of frequency of key categories (Krippendorff, 2004), it should not be viewed as a mere counting process (Bengtsson, 2016). The aim of content analysis is also is to connect the findings from the context in which they were produced (Bengtsson, 2016). In content analysis, context information is assumed whereas it is as explicit in context analysis. Combining both content and context analysis will assist us in examining word usage while assessing the text within the context of its historical and cultural setting.

Content analysis was originally used quantitatively to analyse the existence and associations of concepts and words within the texts with the aim of producing valid measures of news content (Krippendorff, 2004). The idea was to find out "how many" actual numbers or percentages of key categories (Bengtsson, 2016; Krippendorff, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Contextual content analysis, on the other hand, was used to draw some interpretation of the words or themes presented (Bengtsson, 2016; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). These different types of content analysis affect how data will be collected and analysed. Bengtsson (2016) argues that the choice of the analysis will also depend on whether is to be manifest or latent analysis. In the former, the researcher stays very close "to the text, uses the words themselves, and describes the visible and obvious in the text" while the latter seek to find the underlying meaning of text (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 10). The aim is to provide a richer understanding of the mission of each selected university. In this study, the manifest analysis will be used initially to identify visible terms in the mission statements. This will be analysed in terms of how particular terms were used and then count the frequency of specific terms or content. Since this type of analysis will not develop a complete picture, the findings from quantitative content analysis will then need to be analysed further to discover underlying meanings of the terms in relation to the principles of ODL.

For the first part of the analysis, mission statements of six open and distance education universities in Sub-Saharan Africa were analysed in terms of content and their alignment to the open and distance education principles and practices. This was followed by frequency of the used terms.

Table 1 illustrates the name of the Institution, its date of establishment and its mission statement.

All the terms that were highlighted are those that are aligned to the principles of ODL (DHET, 2017). These terms were then ranked according to the frequency of the occurrence of terms used in the mission statements.

Table 2 illustrates the most frequently used terms and their ranking.

INSTITUTION	ESTABLISHED	MISSION
Nation Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)	2002	To provide functional, **cost effective, flexible learning** which add **lifelong** value to **quality** education for all who seek knowledge
Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)	1999	To *empower* people through **lifelong learning**, thereby enabling them to realise their potential in an **affordable** and **flexible** manner while executing their various endeavours.
University of South Africa (UNISA)	1873	UNISA is a *comprehensive,* Open Distance Learning institution that produces excellent scholarship and research, provides **quality** tuition, and fosters active community engagement. We are guided by the principles of **lifelong learning, student-centredness**, *innovation and creativity*. Our efforts contribute to the knowledge and Information society, advance **development,** nurture a critical citizenry, and ensure global *sustainability*.
Open University of Tanzania (OUT)	1992	To continuously provide **quality** open distance education, research and public services for *sustainable* and **equitable** socio-economic **development** of Tanzania in particular and rest of Africa
Open University of Mauritius (OUM)	2012	Use technology and **flexible** mode of teaching to *serve society, transform lives* and make high **quality** education, **lifelong learning**, and training **accessible** to everyone while promoting excellence in research
Botswana Open University (BOU)	2017	To provide **quality** education, research and community engagement through open and distance learning solutions.

Table 1 Institution and Mission Statements.

RANKING	TERMS	FREQUENCY
1	Quality	5
2	Lifelong Learning	4
3	Flexible	3
4	Cost effective/ Affordable	2
5	Development	2

Table 2 Most Frequently used terms.

Based on the findings, the top five principles identified in the mission statements are those that have been mentioned more than once with Quality being the highest mentioned by five universities. All open and distance education universities except ZOU referred to Quality as one of the essential component of their mission statements. Part of the reason may be that distance education institutions have been persistently criticized for their lack of quality because in the minds of many it is not possible to teach large numbers of students without compromising quality. The problem of poor throughput rates and inadequate student support for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds, are some of the issues that fueled the perception of poor quality provision (Tait, 2018). Quality in education is often based on outcomes rather than processes and practices (Green, 1994; Kirkpatrick, 2005). This creates a problem because quality, according to Alexander (2008), should be assessed in relation to the purpose of the institution which is often located in the mission statement. The traditional concept of quality is often associated with the provision of a product or service of extremely high standards which are defined in terms of low numbers and high costs (Daniel et al., 2009; Green, 1994). Institutions that are perceived to provide high quality programmes are those that are selective and spend a lot of money on few students they admit. More often than not, this notion of quality is exclusive in nature. In other words, "an institution with tough admission requirements and high fees is a good institution, regardless of what happens within its walls" (Daniel et al., 2009). Kirkpatrick (2005) argues that quality in distance education should be assessed in relation on how learning materials are produced, delivered and how students are supported throughout their learning journey. If quality is assessed based on the mission of the university, open and distance universities could make a major contribution to enabling access to quality education in the context of the SDGs for 2030 (Tait, 2018). It therefore makes sense that quality should be assessed as something that fits the purpose for which it is designed to do (Harvey & Green, 1993).

The second term that featured prominently in four out of six institutional mission statements is Lifelong Learning. This principle is what led to the establishment of almost all open and distance

education universities of Africa. When faced with the need to address the skills shortage of people who are already working, national policies identified distance education as the only delivery mode that enable adults to study wherever they are. This need of upskilling and reskilling is further exacerbated by digitalization, globalization and the knowledge economy that requires different skills sets. In the past year, Covid-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity for open and distance institutions to start addressing the needs of people who are forced to upskill and reskill to effectively function in the 'new normal'. During this period, many people turned to MOOCs and OERs to upskill themselves (Impey, 2020). The number of enrollments for MOOCs increased exponentially in the first few months of the lockdown.

Open and distance universities were created to address the education needs of working adults. As a result, NOUN, ZOU and OUM identified "Flexibility" in their mission statements. The nature of open and distance education enables any person to access higher education anytime, anywhere and at anyplace. Openness is not only about the space where education takes place, it is also about flexible structures that enable access to as many people as possible using a variety of routes that are both formal and non-formal. An essential characteristic of open and distance universities is the removal of barriers to learning, which entails no prior qualifications, no discrimination by gender, age or religion, and affordability for everyone (Bates, 2015). Most open and distance universities market themselves as institutions that provide cost-effective education to many people, hence the reference to "Affordability" and "Cost effectiveness" in the mission statement of ZOU and NOUN.

Although development is an essential element of open and distance education, only two institutions UNISA and OUT referred to "Development" in their mission statement. However, Tait (2013) found that most global ODL institutions missions are "deeply embedded in development discourse and the politics of social change" (Tait, 2013). These universities were created to develop skilled personnel needed for economic growth. It makes sense therefore, that the concept of development should be reflected in the mission statements of open universities in Sub-Saharan Africa who were established to address high level skill shortage. Although many open and distance education claim that their main purpose is to enable equitable access to education, only OUT mentioned Accessibility; OUM identified Equitability; and UNISA mentioned Student Centredness as the core reason for their existence. With the need to enable equitable access to quality education, according to UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal 4, it is surprising that Accessibility, Equitability and Student Centredness are not featuring prominently in the mission statements. If these guiding principles are not clearly articulated in the mission statements, then what defines the role and the purpose of these institutions. Open and distance learning as a mode of delivery widens the opportunities to do away with exclusion and therefore it is "explicitly linked to its importance for the achievement of the right to education for all", UNESCO (2012).

CONTEXT OF AFRICAN OPEN DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Content analysis revealed that most frequently used words in the mission statements of the six universities carry important information in relation to how the university perceive their role in the society. However, words introduce the context in which the word was created (McTavish & Pirro, 1990). The contextual meaning attached to these words are also important to understand the setting in which a particular word was chosen (McTavish & Pirro, 1990). It is on this basis that the content as embedded in the mission statements is examined within the context of the historical and cultural setting of the universities. The current ODL institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa owe their roots to correspondence education which was created specifically to provide much needed educational opportunities to those who for various reasons were unable to study full time. Distance education or correspondence education as it was called back then, has been around for more than 150 years and was developed from the need to make education accessible to those people who were excluded from formal education. The early pioneers of correspondence education were concerned with making educational opportunities accessible to a wider audience. The first higher education institution to provide education at a scale was the external study system of the University of London in 1858 (Manson, 2016; Tait, 2008). From there, other European countries started to provide higher education using correspondence mode. In the United States, distance learning was established to provide literature studies for women who were working from home and also wanted to participate in higher education

(Caruth & Caruth, 2013). By the end of the 19th century, there were a lot more institutions that were offering correspondence courses with the main purpose of providing education to the masses (Tait, 2008).

During the colonial era, expatriates who were working as administrators in colonised countries studied through correspondence. To ensure that colonies are serving the British empire, the curriculum of the University of London External study was based on serving the British "empire with its oppression of peoples all around the world" (Tait, 2008, p. 86). By so doing, according to Tait (2008), "the mission of international distance education was born" (p. 86). In South Africa, the University of the Cape of Good Hope, the predecessor of the University of South Africa, was established in 1873, with the sole purpose of being an examining centre for Cambridge and Oxford Universities (Manson, 2016). In other parts of the continent, correspondence education was provided by commercial correspondence colleges to provide programmes meant to develop skills for colonial administrators (Biao, 2012). However, very few Africans enrolled with overseas correspondence colleges until the 1960s when many African countries received their independence (Biao, 2012). By the time of independence in the early 1960s, a few African countries had universities, and it was incumbent on governments of new states to come up with plans to provide training for their citizens and free themselves from colonial ties. However, none of the post-independence strategies were able to define what relevant education looks like. In fact, early policies were criticized for encouraging elitism and imitated the education system left behind by colonisers (Simiyu, 2001).

When it became clear that the inherited education is unlikely to respond to the educational needs of Sub-Saharan nation states, ministries of education saw the potential of distance study as a means both of expanding educational opportunity and of providing trained manpower. Initially distance education was used primarily to provide training for unqualified primary school teachers. The huge shortage of places in African universities and the need to improve capacity forced countries to consider distance education as mode of delivery (Biao, 2012). In countries like Nigeria, only 7% of qualified candidates for higher education could get placement at universities (Biao, 2012). The search for people with high level skills, digitalization and globalization fuelled the expansion of the open and distance learning institutions. Even contact universities are now offering distance education programmes to provide access to a growing number of people in need of tertiary education. While acknowledging the necessity of distance education in widening access, distance education was also expected to provide academically credible and quality education content at a low cost. Due to this need, a number of institutions offering distance programmes increased exponentially in the past 20 years. Most universities in Anglophone African countries used distance teaching to train thousands of under trained primary and schoolteachers needed for universal primary education. Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Nigeria and many other countries used distance teaching to assist and upgrade teaching skills for many teachers who are already working in the field (Betchoo, 2015).

Despite the long history of distance education in Africa, this mode of delivery did not receive traction until the 90's when it became clear that provision of face-to-face education is no longer sustainable. Many conventional universities started looking at ways to accommodate students who did not have space at universities. Units and departments of distance education started springing up in many conventional universities. These entities gave birth to some open universities in the Sub-Saharan Africa. The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) started off as a Centre for Distance Education of the University of Zimbabwe and later transformed into a fully-fledged open university in 1999 created to provide training for working adults (Muchena, 2013). The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) was also set-up in 1992 to provide university education to working adults and school leavers who could not find a place in conventional universities due to lack of capacity (Mhache, 2013). The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was also established to provide tertiary education to a massive number of Nigerians who were in desperate need of university education. In fact, it took 18 years of negotiations and pressure from Nigerians before the government conceded to its establishment in 2001 (Ambe-Uva, 2007). The Open University of Mauritius (OUM) also started out as the Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) which was established in 1971 to offer education through mass media (Patten & Chadhee, 2018). The Botswana Open University (BOU) came to being in 2017, making it the latest edition to open universities in the continent. It owes its roots from Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL), which was created to provide lower level education

to young people who could not attend full-time study (Tladi & Nleya, 2021). It also provided courses for people who wish to improve their job-related qualifications at a pre-university level.

As other institutions both private and public provided correspondence education, UNISA is credited as being the first university to offer higher education courses through correspondence. The transition of Unisa from being an examining body of British universities to a "truly" South African university supporting Afrikaner nationalism managed "to diminish the domination of British origin" (Tait, 2008, p. 88). Even in the middle of apartheid in South Africa where universities were segregated according to race, Unisa was the only university that opened up unprecedented opportunities for all people of different races especially blacks who were systematically excluded from participating in higher education. Currently Unisa is the largest open distance learning institution in Africa and the longest standing dedicated distance education university in the world. With close to 150 years as a teaching institution, Unisa currently has an enrolment of over 350 000 students from different races, continents, and backgrounds. Distance education in South Africa accounts for almost 40% of the total enrolment in higher education institutions. The sustainability of open and distance universities is depended on their willingness to change and address the lifelong learning needs that their developing countries desperately need especially now during and post Covid-19. If these universities do not address what they were created for, they will have to contend with competition from contact universities that are moving rapidly to online space. It is during this time of the pandemic that open and distance education have to show its capability of instructional design to support remote students and their capacity to train people who are new to distance and online forms of learning. This shows that ODL universities play an extremely critical role in addressing the development agenda of African countries.

CONCLUSION

Based on this context, it makes sense that mission statements of open and distance universities should be guided by open principles of accessibility, equity, flexibility, quality, lifelong learning, student centredness (DHET, 2017). However, the findings revealed that there is still a gap between mission and practice. These findings are similar to what Tait (2018) found when he analysed the mission of 12 open universities. He raised concerns about "the extent to which rhetoric had outrun achievements" in many open universities (Tait, 2018). Therefore, open universities should reposition themselves in light of the new development in the education sector and this should be guided by the principles of social justice aspirations where there is an increasing need to decrease inequality (Lambert, 2018). The social justice mandate, which is meant to address historical institutionalised injustice, should be articulated in the mission statements. Without the inclusion of social justice principles in the mission statements, open and distance education institutions will not adhere to its primary purpose of providing equitable access to quality programmes.

Given the context of open and distance universities, it makes sense therefore that they should be trailblazers in developing capacity and ensuring access and success to people who are adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Open and distance education universities, by nature uses mediated forms of delivery, it is therefore expected that they lead a way by capacitating people from other universities and schools who are new to using technologies for teaching and learning. Mission statements provides the basis for judging the success of the institution. Therefore, open and distance education universities should remain true to their mission by doing what they were established to do. Based on the content of the mission statements, and what open and distance universities are doing in practice, it is difficult to assess whether these institutions are doing what they were created to do. One sampled university's mission statement is so general that any university can identify with. It is therefore important that particular attention should be taken when developing a mission statement and this should be aligned with the principles that guides the identity of the university and its future role in the society.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Mpine Makoe ⬤ orcid.org/0000-0003-4192-1781
University of South Africa, ZA

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