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# Revisiting the open and distance learning agenda within a neoliberal digital world

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## Abstract

In a globalised world informed by the tenets of neoliberalism, there is evidence that open and distance learning (ODL) has benefited from technological advancements, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. These have advanced the cause of distance learning by expanding its frontiers and making education more flexible, accessible, and personalised with enhanced quality. However, ODL is not just a method of teaching that makes education more flexible and accessible without discrimination; it is also a philosophy. As a philosophy, ODL moves beyond finding the right answers to philosophical and practical enquiries and assists us in querying the essence of the phenomenon itself. Therefore, meaningful access to education (a fundamental human right) becomes the essence of ODL. Inasmuch as the digital world advances the cause of ODL to a certain degree, it is necessary to examine whether the terms open and distance learning are still serving their initial purpose or if they are both gradually losing their essence, especially in a fluid digital environment. Unfortunately, commercial provision, one aspect of neoliberalism, does not have an incentive to reach the most marginalised, including those who cannot afford to pay fees. Drawing upon Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach (CA) and a focus on African Commonwealth Countries, this reflective paper examines the principles of inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability, and how these can serve as a unifying framework for diverse educational models. ODL must still maintain its social credibility in the 21st century and beyond, amidst commercial and technocentric educational approaches.

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## Keywords

distance education agenda; neoliberalism; capabilities approach; inclusivity; sustainability



## 1 Introduction

UNICEF (202) defines distance education (DE) as a form of “education provided to students without regular, in-person contact with a classroom teacher, and may be carried out through print materials, radio or television programmes, via offline and online digital technology, or a combination of these” (p. 6). Due to its versatility, it can serve marginalised students who otherwise may not have access to education. This group includes students from rural and conflict areas, those working full-time, the differently abled, and those affected by extreme weather conditions. It is a recognised field of education with dedicated literature and professionals (Geçer et al., 2023; Nichols, 2024). From its onset, DE has always benefited from technology, which bridges and mediates the transactional distance between institutions and students; hence, the symbiotic relationship between technology and DE. Therefore, for many, distance education “is not just a method of learning; it is a philosophy that aims to democratize education by making it accessible to all, regardless of background, location, or time constraints” (Distance Learning Institute, 2024).

Peters (1994) asserts that DE makes it possible for education to become a fundamental right to which everyone is entitled. Therefore, its primary role is the promotion of social justice through the provision of access to education, which has been the philosophy behind it since its inception (Evans & Jakupec, 2023). For reasons outlined in this paper, however, it no longer seems possible simply to assume this connection. Rather, it now seems necessary to refer to ‘open’ distance education to distinguish it from the use of distance education methods, particularly online learning approaches, driven by more commercial or utilitarian interests. We can then understand open and distance learning (ODL) as an approach within the open distance education field, one which focuses on the motivations for and outcomes of student learning, the particular focus of this discussion.

In this reflective article, the authors, through the lens of Amartya Sen’s (1985; 1993) Capabilities Approach (CA) and a focus on African Commonwealth Countries (ACC) (The Commonwealth, 2025), probe the initial agenda of ODL, juxtapose this with neoliberalism tenets, examine the principles of inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability, and examine how these can serve as a unifying framework for diverse educational models. To this end, the authors suggest how ODL can maintain its social credibility in the 21st century and beyond, amidst commercial and technocentric educational approaches.

With the advent of neoliberalism in the 1990s came innovative technological advancements that have served the purpose of ODL by furthering the provision of flexible, accessible, and personalised education with more enhanced quality (Koçdar et al., 2023). As noted by Jones and Ball (2023), however, the impact of neoliberal thinking is pervasive and ongoing and complicated by the fact that there is not a single understanding of what it entails, although marketisation of education provision seems to be a strong recurring element. As Mintz (2021) argues, this has led to a shift away from the notion of education as a public good towards the notion of a student as a paying customer. This became especially true after the recent COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, which initiated a strategic reset in terms of both teaching and learning approaches and education funding (Bozkurt et al., 2022; Macfarlane, 2023).

There is also ample evidence in many countries in the Commonwealth that there is an increasing need for hybrid provision – print and contact for some, blended for others, and fully online, for yet others (African Union Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa’s Development, 2022). Nonetheless, despite major interventions such as the UNICEF Global Partnership for Education (GPE), about 21% of learners do not complete secondary school, and there are growing numbers of Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs) youth unable or unwilling to

access educational opportunities offered through in-person provision (UNESCO-Institute for Statistics, 2019; UNICEF/GPE, 2022). So, there is still a need for publicly funded provision to reach these students and possibly provide a way out of the poverty cycle for them. This is because the challenge remains to open access to those learners who are not being reached by conventional in-person or commercial, or technocentric approaches. As noted, various forms of ODL provision may be needed in each context to reach the most marginalised or disengaged learners and different business models deployed to make these alternative offerings sustainable, which may involve a mix of government subsidy, student fees, and third-stream income generation, including philanthropic sponsorships (Hülsmann, 2016; Jha, 2024; Murangi, 2020).

Despite technology advancing the cause of open and distance education by expanding its frontiers, it may also be peeling back the value it adds, especially in an uneven technological landscape. This is because neoliberalist education policies and execution are characterised by the growing commercialisation of educational institutions and activities, leaving them at the mercy of market forces (Edeji, 2024; Ugur, 2017). Invariably, education becomes a tool in the hands of neoliberalism (Edeji, 2024) to the neglect of social justice, which should be the essence of ODL provision. Technology is here to stay, but how can practitioners "...reclaim the values of openness and distance without giving in to a techno-centric or market-driven narrative?" (Nichols, 2025). Reclaiming the founding tenets of ODL requires different business and funding models as we progressively seek to overcome increasing digital divides, and probably needs a new lens through which ODL provision can be viewed. Distance education needs to maintain its social credibility in the 21st century and beyond by reasserting its original open intent.

## 2 Methodological disposition: Sen's Capabilities Approach

This reflective article is framed within the Capabilities Approach propounded by Amartya Sen (Sen, 1993). As noted by Clark (2005), Sen managed to unify several formerly disparate arguments into a single philosophical framework, although several researchers pointed to gaps in the framework. It was later advanced further by Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2000), who sought to provide even greater coherence and alignment with social justice for the most marginalised members of society. Jamil (2024 p. 73) opines that both scholars' views (of pluralism and universalism, respectively) can be juxtaposed to tackle global inequalities and advance social justice, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Irrespective of the divergences, scholars (Robeyns, 2009; Wilson-Strydom, 2011; Ribeiro, 2015; Bartolomei et al., 2024) describe the Capabilities Approach as a substitute tool and framework to assess well-being regarding people's quality of life instead of by utilitarian measures. It concentrates on social justice as the yardstick for gauging and moulding educational institutions' ability to contribute to an unprejudiced society, human worth, and well-being (Rajapakse, 2016). Thus, "the core characteristic of the Capability Approach is to move away from the income-led evaluation methods and focus on people's ability to achieve the things that they value" (Frediani, 2010, p. 174). Therefore, the extent of the freedom they have in achieving this becomes important to Sen, and in focusing on what stakeholders value rather than prescribing values, the Capability Approach can accommodate diverse perspectives, such as those of the post-colonial countries focused on in this discussion.

The five main concepts in the Capability Approach are: *functionings*, which is "what an individual chooses to be or do" (Alkire, 2003, p. 5); *capability set*, a "combination of different functionings achievable by a person" (Bartolomei et al., 2024, p. 369); *agency (freedom)*, which "is directly related to relations of power" (Frediani, 2010, p. 180); *conversion factors* that can be personal, social and environmental characteristics (Frediani, 2010), and *resources*, which "can be tangible (such as schools, transport, and houses) or intangible (such as policies)" (p. 178). However, according to

Sen (1984), capabilities “are not primarily concerned with what goods or income or resources people have” (p. 316) because resources are simply means to an end.

For the authors of this article, education is regarded as central to achieving all other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union’s Agenda 2063 goals, while access to quality education sets people free from poverty (United Nations, 2023; African Union, n. d.). Nonetheless, this is only true if they have the appropriate conversion factors (Robeyns, 2017). Furthermore, authors (Rajapakse, 2016; Ndille, 2018) argue that education should not only address meeting the capital needs of the society but also prioritise individuals’ needs and aspirations. Although access to education in the African Commonwealth Countries has improved (Bennell, 2021), Wilson-Strydom (2011) describes the idea of increasing access without a chance of success as “a form of social exclusion” (p. 407), a situation that demands Sen’s capabilities approach perspective. As well, using measures such as school enrolment and educational achievement does not give us insights into the inequalities learners undergo (Hart, 2018).

Hart (2018) identifies three spaces in which education inequalities show themselves: access to education, experiences of education, and opportunities afforded to people at the end of their education. This confirms his earlier assertion that “the places and spaces in which education occurs are not limited by policy and institutional boundaries but rather overflow into all areas of life” (Hart, 2014, p. 4). Therefore, the Capabilities Approach lens will help us to better compare the opportunities people have, the ones they seize and why, and the factors contributing to their aspirations development or preventing it. It is more important and of utmost urgency to discuss human worth, freedom, and agency in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) era, where AI and multiplicative technology are precipitously changing the world (Jacobson & Chang, 2019; Jamil, 2024).

### 3 Discussion

In this section, the authors consider the agenda of ODL in general, then focus on ODL provision in the African Commonwealth countries with which the authors are most familiar, then explore the link between neoliberalism and technology, and finally use these reflections to revisit the ODL agenda from a Capability Approach perspective rooted in the concept of social justice.

#### 3.1. ODL and its agenda

Literature avers that since the 1960s and 1970s, distance education, and subsequently ODL, was seen as a more cost-efficient and effective means of leveraging lifelong education to the populace, but at that stage, education was treated as a fundamental human right (Rumble, 2007; Yasmin, 2010; Lee, 2020). The growth experienced in education in the period, according to Rumble (2007), was because the government saw it as a duty in addition to the human capital dimension. The human right to education has been broadly spelled out in various international policy documents and instruments, with the UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960) serving as the foundational document that has been ratified by 107 states (UNESCO, 2025), including the Commonwealth African countries. These have been reflected internationally in the current SDG4 goal (Boisvert, 2022). However, Lee (2020) argues that although the instruments are meant to serve as protection for the citizenry, laws “can be manipulated by politics, and people can be indoctrinated with bad policies and ideas” (p. 789).

According to Preez (2012), the idea of the “right to education” is often slippery due to the legality and the complexity of defining education and a lack of attention to the key meanings behind the term “right.” Therefore, Lee (2020) stresses the need to consider the “purpose, function, quantity,

quality, access, subjects, and contents of education” (p. 822). In line with these, Rumble (2007) earlier argued for the need to re-emphasise:

...the humanitarian mission of distance education as a means of meeting lifelong educational needs of massive numbers of people; a rejection of attempts to privatise distance education provision through the greater use of the private sector; the rejection of so-called cost-sharing measures that place the burden of costs on people who cannot afford fees; and an acceptance of the need to keep the costs of providing distance education down (to limit the call on the public purse and individuals) (p. 167).

However, this agenda has been overturned by neoliberalism, which advocates for the non-governmental sponsorship of education, promotes cost-sharing (by students) and education privatisation (Rumble, 2007). Rumble argues this led to “competitive individualism” (p. 170), while shifting the focus from school as a common good to it as merely a reserved and distinctive good and service (De Saxe, 2015).

All these shifts identified above imply that highly economically polarised societies are left at the mercy of market forces that determine the choices available to them. According to UNESCO (2025), of the 244 million children and youth worldwide who are still out of school, 98 million are in sub-Saharan Africa. Citing the example of India (with a similar context as in the African Commonwealth countries), Yasmin (2010) earlier argued that in societies with high socio-economic standards and a lack of equal access to quality education at a reduced cost, for the most marginalised learners “a well-formulated ODL policy and efficient delivery system can serve as an effective instrument in ensuring social justice.” Nonetheless, Rambiritch (2024) argues that the efforts to widen access to education should not be limited to numbers and statistics only, but should also reflect in quality teaching and learning. Although access to education has been widened in the African Commonwealth countries, the quality of the offerings remains a huge challenge (UNICEF, 2022).

### 3.2. ODL in the African Commonwealth Countries

Most African countries continue to “share in the intergenerational legacy of colonisation and the historical and continued marginalisation” (Prinsloo, 2017, p. 104), chief among which is education. ODL has a long and rich history on the continent, with a handful of its populace before independence from the colonial powers in Europe, pursuing education through European and North American institutions (Nyerere et al., 2012; Prinsloo, 2017). According to Jenkins (1989), after independence, due to a lack of finance and manpower, distance education, and subsequently ODL, were a major stratagem to assist African countries with improving the educational status of their citizens. Several countries launched open universities, for example, the University of South Africa, the National Open University of Nigeria, and the Open University of Tanzania, and post-pandemic, there has been an increase in dual and mixed mode provision. The purpose has not changed, however, due to ODL’s ability to expand equitable education access, thus balancing the educational deficits of the population (Ibrahim & Mohammed, 2019; Isaacs & Mohee, 2020). For instance, in South Africa, ODL assists the country “to support a wider range of student choices regarding access, curriculum, pacing, sequencing, learning modes and methods, assessments, and articulation” (DHET, 2014, p. 2).

Kisirikoi and Kamanga (2023) indicated that before the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced a transition to online provision at all institutions, in Africa, there had been a slow uptake with uneven levels of development. In African Commonwealth countries, ODL has mostly shifted from the first generation to the fifth in some instances due to technological advancements (Bozkurt, 2019). Although ODL is being widely used on the continent with positive results, it is not devoid of challenges (Kgobe & Sebola, 2021; Distance Learning Institute, 2024). For instance,

Coughlan et al. (2021) identified key difficulties in the area of technologies, such as staff's lack of important knowledge and skills (for example, assessment), a technology-mediated connection constrained and inconsistent between staff and students due to inappropriate devices, bandwidth cost, and connectivity issues, and hindrances to the adoption of modern methods due to policy impingement.

Authors (Mays & Aluko, 2019; Kgobe & Sebola, 2021; Aluko et al., 2022; Kisirkoi & Kamanga, 2023) have also identified a lack of all-encompassing national/institutional ICT policy and quality assurance mechanisms to ensure the quality of graduates produced through ODL towards the SDG4 goals. Authors aver that African Commonwealth countries' future in distance education will be determined by "the development of new media and computing technologies, the methods of group learning and information gathering and the development of government telecommunication policies" based on "meaningful budgetary allocations and the Africanization of the curriculum for effective response to peculiar African challenges" (Ibrahim & Mohammed, 2019, p. 91). Future decisions and trajectories should, therefore, be supported by research evidence (Madlela & Ngakane, 2024).

### 3.3. The notion of neoliberalism and technology in education

Intrinsically linked to globalisation, neoliberalism is defined by Harvey (2005) as "a theory of political practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private properties, free markets, and free trade." (p. 2). Therefore, to Ball and Grimaldi (2021), it is not just a single universal instrument, but a "migratory set of practices (that) occurs in interactions with pre-existing social, political and cultural conditions to give rise to varied and diverse manifestations" (p. 288). According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism "has become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (p. 2). Neoliberalism is beyond an ordinary set of policies; rather, Miraftab (2009), cited in Gilherme and Picoli (2019), describes it as "a network of policies, ideologies, values and rationalities, that aims to encompass all peoples, institutions, and culture itself" (p. 34). Discourse synchronises "power and knowledge" (Mutuota, 2024) in a way that "those who have power have control of what is known and the way it is known, and those who have such knowledge have power over those who do not" (Ashcroft et al., 2000, p. 72). The theory relates to the "extensive economic liberalization and policies that extend the rights and abilities of the private sector over the public sector, specifically shutting down state and government power over the economy" (Sharma & Sanford, 2018, p. 341).

Education and society are eternally synchronized due to the role schools play in molding citizens (De Saxe, 2015). Prevailing societal ideas shape the purpose of education, what is taught, and how the system is run. Invariably, education becomes a tool to further neoliberal ideas (Edeji, 2024). Therefore, if neoliberal ideas pervade a society, Apple (2001), cited in De Saxe (2015), describes the system as a "vast supermarket" in which, for instance,

Rather than democracy being a political concept, it is transformed into a wholly economic concept...the entire project of neoliberalism is connected to a larger process of exporting the blame from the decisions of dominant groups on the state and onto poor people (p. 39).

Therefore, De Saxe (2015) contends that neoliberal policies reject social projects because they see them as not economically viable without care for their impact on the less privileged. Labaree (1997), hence, purports "the social mobility approach to schooling argues that education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive

advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions" (p. 42), with no guarantee (Anyon, 2011). Thus, neoliberalism unswervingly challenges the understandings of education as a public good (Melanson, 2023). Melanson argues that "education has increasingly been viewed through a business lens, with major cuts in spending; attacks on teachers' unions; and increasing standardization of curriculum, instruction and assessment" (p. 5).

Notwithstanding the downside of the impact of neoliberalism, it has played a huge role in technological advancements, which have in turn expanded distance education horizons. According to Coetzee (2023, p. 51), ODL "has added new dimensions to the industrialisation of distance education." Although not new to distance education, technology has completely changed the face of education, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, educational technology is known as any type of technology that is used to mediate educational processes (Le Grange et al., 2022) while major advances in technologies "have been in devices, networks and memory, with a movement from desktop personal computers and mainframe computers to mobile phones and tablets connected to high-speed networks and the cloud" (Jones, 2019, p. 287). Technology in education has furthered the provision of quality education by being "a knowledge provider, a co-creator of information, a mentor, and an assessor" (Haleem et al., 2022, p. 275).

Nonetheless, scholars (Le Grange et al., 2022; Teräs et al., 2020) see technology as a form of control that helps to further the neoliberalist agenda, for instance, where students from disadvantaged communities have no access to technology. Therefore, we propose a look at the principles of inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability in light of Amartya Sen's capabilities approach to assist with enhancing the social credibility of distance education.

#### 3.4. Revisiting the distance education agenda within a neoliberal-digital world

Recent UNESCO (2025) information on the right to education paints a very dismal picture of 244 million children and youth excluded from school due to social, financial, and cultural reasons. Unfortunately, almost 100 million reside in sub-Saharan Africa, where African commonwealth countries are located. If one of the main reasons for this is financial, and as earlier indicated, neoliberal principles do not embrace an incentive to decommercialise education, there is a need to revisit the ODL agenda within a neoliberal-digital world. Education as a fundamental human right resonates with the distance education agenda in the 1960s and 1970s, to increase access by extending education to those who could have been left behind for one reason or another. According to UNESCO (2015), education and knowledge should be regarded as "global common goods" (p. 11) due to the "need for sustainable development in an increasingly interdependent world." Therefore, Szekely and Mason (2019) assert that the "real opportunities provided by society mean much more than just the right to education... They entail the physical and meaningful provision of the wherewithal through which people might realise their right to education" (p. 676). The provision of quality education helps people break free from the grip of poverty, thereby reducing inequalities and making it possible to facilitate the marginalised and disadvantaged's participation in society (Hart, 2018; Rajapakse, 2016). However, authors (Preez, 2012; Rajapakse, 2016) differentiate between legal and moral rights, with Preez (2012) describing the right to education as "inevitably important" (p. 52). However, Rajapakse argues that regarding it as only legal increases the violation of the right by the government, while the moral stance forces it to be better committed to the attached responsibilities. Sen's capabilities approach, adopted for this study, is committed to:

1. Treating each person as an end in themselves.
2. A focus on choice and freedom rather than achievements.
3. Pluralism about values.

4. Being deeply concerned with entrenched social injustices.
5. Ascribing an urgent task to the government. (Nussbaum, 2007, pp. 50-54)

Nonetheless, in the case where neoliberalism has encouraged the privatisation of basic services (including education), and individuals must be responsible for the costs (Rumble, 2007), this stands in opposition to education being a fundamental human right. Hart (2018), as earlier indicated, draws our attention to the three spaces in which inequalities manifest themselves in education: “opportunities to access,” “experiences of education,” and the “outcome opportunities” (p. 583). To Sen (Robeyns, 2005), “What is ultimately important is that people have the freedoms or valuable opportunities (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be” (p. 95). Once they effectively have these substantive opportunities, they can choose those options that they value most” (Robeyns, 2005, p. 94). However, the challenge is that, given the context in which African Commonwealth countries’ children/youth find themselves, neither freedoms nor valuable opportunities are available to them, thus their choices are restricted. Robeyns (2020) rightly argues that this controls the quality of the life they live. Neoliberalism (utilitarianism) mostly considers the instrumental benefit of education, thereby neglecting (partially neglecting other non-economic factors (e.g., personal satisfaction and development), which Sen wants to add (Rajapakse, 2016). It also, through its principles, forces governments to exploit the choices available to their people (Rumble, 2007). This, according to the author, makes distance education lose its social credibility not just towards the younger generation that could use education as a means of developing “opportunities to pursue a life they have reason to value” (Hart, 2009, p. 401), but also robs adults of pursuing lifelong education. Honderich (2002), cited in Rumble (2007), differentiates between “good lives” and “bad lives” (p. 171), the latter to which it appears the majority in the African Commonwealth countries have been sentenced. In consonance with Sen’s Capabilities Approach, according to Honderich (2002) cited in Rumble (2007), a life is bad, “if they lack the great satisfaction of freedom, power and safety ... [and] if it is deprived of what we all want, a human standing” (p. 172).

At the heart of education on the continent, and of concern to this treatise, is technology in education, which has been more pronounced after COVID-19. Sen (1981) regards technology as an input that can generate capabilities. Therefore, according to Sen (2010), mobile technology, for instance, should be “freedom-enhancing” (p. 2). Although scholars agree that technology is beneficial to education, the uneven technological landscape confronting the African Commonwealth countries, which range from the cost of technological gadgets, low bandwidth with its cost, to a lack of technical skills among students and teachers, has not allowed the countries to maximise the benefits. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, about two-thirds of the population had no access to the internet (Aluko et al., 2022). There is also the fear that although the ground gained during the time should lead to innovation, countries in the region could revert to a lower-standard teaching and learning status quo before the pandemic. There is ample evidence in many countries in the Commonwealth that there is an increasing need for a hybrid provision – print and contact for some, blended for others, and fully online for yet others (African Union Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa’s Development, 2022). However, only the latter can survive campus closures due to, for instance, pandemics, conflict, and extreme weather events. This situation requires different business and funding models as we progressively seek to overcome digital divides.

Nonetheless, the possibility of maximising the most ubiquitous technology in countries for teaching and learning – mobile technology – offers hope. The technology has been identified as crucial to driving the digital revolution and socioeconomic development in sub-Saharan Africa (GSMA, 2024). Although Africa remains the least connected region, according to the organisation,

there is a continual growth of users with 527 million (44% penetration rate) in 2023, projected to reach 751 million (53% penetration rate) in 2030, while operators are being encouraged to tackle the challenges of affordability, safety, and digital proficiencies (GSM, 2024). Although this is the reality in African Commonwealth countries, these countries form a huge chunk of the world population living in rural areas without mobile connectivity, with a 60% usage gap driven by poor digital knowledge and germane local content (Communications Africa, 2024). According to Communications Africa, a key challenge is affordability, while the existing gender remains a reality (GSMA, 2025).

From the foregoing, revisiting the distance education agenda within a neoliberal-digital world demands a critical look at the principles of inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability that can serve as a unifying framework for the diverse educational models identified in the African Commonwealth countries.

### 3.5. Principles of inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability as a unifying framework

The goal of the SGD4 is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2023). UNESCO International Bureau of Education (2008) defines inclusive education as “an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination” (p. 3). Inclusivity in education means including everyone in the learning environment, which, according to authors (Cabrera et al., 2019; Gottschalk & Weise, 2023), should move beyond disability or other educational needs. Non-inclusivity leads to exclusion, the causes of which are multi-faceted, which could include financial constraints, gender inequality, geographical location, and the type of school one finishes from (Cabrera et al., 2019). Therefore, Veal (2024) identified the principles of inclusivity as “equality and diversity, collaboration and partnership, access and participation, and empowerment and autonomy”.

Nonetheless, worldwide, educational institutions are incessantly searching to balance the quality of education and massification with profitability (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). Guri-Rosenblit (1999, p. 1825) defines scalability as “the ability to increase enrollment while remaining profitable, or at least financially self-sustaining, without adversely affecting course and program quality”. Dudnik (2010, cited in Niemann, 2017) aptly explained scalability as “developing products or services that people want and figuring out how to produce many of them for lower costs, while selling more of them” (p. 93). However, Maritim and Getuno (2018), in their study, extended this definition to include the incongruity between the scalability of numbers and success rates, which has been the elephant in the room and the “distance education deficit” in most contexts (Simpson, 2013). Guri-Rosenblit (1999) identifies factors that affect scalability as “interaction, learning levels, student class standing, faculty tenure or continuing status, completion rates, cohort versus non-cohort settings, degree-versus non-degree-seeking programs, market type, tuition costs, and profitability” (p. 1825). There is evidence in the literature that although research on the use of technology in both online and blended programs (concerning design and effectiveness) is available, there is a paucity of scalability studies (Serdyukov, 2017; Soncin et al., 2022).

According to Bell et al. (2017), the term sustainability embodies a broad set of ideas. We borrow from the definition of Brundtland and Khalid (as cited in Bell et al., 2017) that sustainability is “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 95). According to Khatami et al. (2022), the four main critical factors of sustainability are “environmental, economic, social, and technical sustainability” (p. 9). Given the SDG4 goal, for inclusivity and scalability to take root, Ezeanya-Esiobu (2019) avers that it is important to consider sustainability factors; this is further buttressed by Xiao (2023), who argues,

for instance, that technology-based education cannot be sustainably open without both cost-effectiveness and accessibility.

## 4 Conclusion and suggestions for future research

In this reflective article, we set out to examine the extent to which the terms open and distance learning are still serving their initial purpose or if they are both gradually losing their essence, especially in a fluid digital environment. Post-pandemic, there has been a surge in the use of distance education approaches as providers seek to insulate themselves from further in-person and campus-based disruptions due to pandemics, conflicts, climate emergencies, or other issues, and at the same time, exploit the potential of improved connectivity and access to digital devices. However, it is not clear that the more recent use of distance education methods is informed by the same commitment to openness, social justice, inclusivity, and public commitment to scaling and sustaining as was the case with the early pioneers in the field. Using Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach (CA) helped us to assess the situation in African Commonwealth countries. As evident from our findings, although to an extent, neoliberalism has helped to advance the *good life* goal of education in the countries (Honderich, 2002), a significant proportion of their populace are at a disadvantage because the philosophy encourages the commercialisation of education and the technological affordances that assist in making the burden lighter. This removes education from being a common good to the level of the survival of the fittest. This is particularly acute in schooling provision, where less than 80% of learners are accessing and completing secondary education through in-person provision, in contexts in which per capita spending is stagnant or declining, and in which many countries have no formal public open schooling provision to help marginalised learners escape the poverty cycle (UNICEF/GPE, 2022).

Therefore, our findings raise these fundamental questions to be addressed by all stakeholders:

1. What aspects of educational provision need to be funded differently in each context to increase access to education?
2. What diverse business models can make education more sustainable in these countries?
3. If technology has become a necessity, how can its benefits be maximised and access improved?
4. Why is a teeming population of those who have passed through/partially passed through the formal education system not finding fulfilment (as evident from the high number of the NEET generation in the countries)?

The CA adopted for this reflection helps us to provide answers to the above questions.

### **What aspects of educational provision need to be funded differently in each context to increase access to education?**

All forms of education: formal, informal, and non-formal can benefit from technology as evidenced by literature (Haleem et al., 2022). However, functional education that meets the needs of the context will assist its teeming population to find fulfilment because they will be treated as an end in themselves and will be doing what they value, which CA encourages (Robeyns, 2005). Ndille (2018) asserts, "worthwhile education should grow out of the environment, and the learning process should be directly related to the pattern of life in the society concerned" (p. 4). Thousands from emerging economies will stop dying on their voyage to the other side of the world, where they think the grass is greener. It is not enough to blindly pump more money/resources into education without considering each context. As argued by Xiao (2023), technology (solely) is not the panacea to our educational woes; thus, the need to consider the context – for instance, we retain paper-based distance education, where it is necessary. The CA

adopted for this article asserts that providing citizens with alternatives to choose from is important to their humanity and reflects the real opportunities they have (Robeyns, 2020).

### **What diverse business models can make education more sustainable in these countries?**

Fee-free schools have been introduced in much of sub-Saharan Africa to improve education access. In addition, there is a provision of printed self-study material and after-hours contact sessions, especially in open schooling. However, as rightly observed by Mays and Murangi (2025), the maintenance costs of these have been rising exponentially, including the fact that the continent is confronted with a growing digitally-oriented youth, less interested in print. All these, according to the authors, make schools dependent on government subsidies and therefore vulnerable to economic meltdown. Therefore, alongside diversified delivery models (print-based, blended, and online), it is necessary to consider diversified income streams (e.g., offering services for a fee, selling study materials to day schools and scholars who can afford them, and introducing vocational courses for a fee to the working-class) (Mays & Murangi, 2025). More of the populace will be afforded quality access to education.

### **If technology has become a necessity, how can its benefits be maximised and access improved?**

Given the uneven technological landscape, which countries are being confronted with as earlier indicated, the continued growth of mobile technology on the continent brings more hope. We acknowledge the many pockets of technological innovation on the continent; nonetheless, Serdyukov (2017) earlier argued that there can be no effective change if these cannot be spread and executed on a large scale. Ezeanya-Esiobu (2019) rightly argues, “for technology to be considered appropriate, it must be founded on certain fundamental principles, which include accessibility and affordability; ease of utilisation and maintenance; meeting real needs of end-users; and effectiveness” (p. 99). We believe this will help countries to maximise technological benefits, thus making it more inclusive, scalable, and sustainable. More research on these indices is needed, especially around scalability to ensure their cost-effectiveness and accessibility, as research indicates (Soncin et al., 2022).

### **Why is a teeming population of those who have passed through/partially passed through the formal education system not finding fulfilment (as evident from the high number of the NEET generation in the countries)?**

Having policies in place is not enough. If we continue to act contrary to Rumble’s (2007) advice of not privatising distance education provision, encouraging cost-sharing measures that place education burden costs on the less privileged, and maintaining exorbitant education costs, which are currently the status quo, we will keep feeding and strengthening the neo-liberalist agenda contrary to the distance education agenda. It is time to wean African Commonwealth countries off “policy entrepreneurs” (Ball, 2012, p. 62) who sell alien policies to the African context to encourage reliance on resources and expertise (Mutuota, 2024). ODL providers need to contextualise education with technology in such a way that negative climatic conditions, war, or another world crisis will not shut education down again.

One of the byproducts of CA is agency, which is the ability to choose one’s life trajectory as part of, for instance, a community. Jacobson and Chang (2019) explain that this does not suggest “the narrow meaning in which an agent represents someone else,” but rather “government by discussion” (pp. 115-116). According to them, “Sen’s overall theory holds that public communication should lead to more effective government understanding of public interests” (p. 116). Through dialogue, in African Commonwealth countries, it is necessary to reassert the “open” agenda in distance learning provision and to fund it appropriately to reach the most

marginalised learners who are typically not the focus of provision that is informed by neoliberal ideology.

Lastly, we hope that our study will generate not only more discussion but also lead to more robust research on the link between neoliberalist philosophy and distance education, in which there has been, to date, a paucity of research (Coetzee, 2023).

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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