

DIGITALISATION IN EDUCATION: BRINGING ADULT EDUCATION INTO THE DEBATE



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In 2021, the African Union (AU) published its policy guidelines on digitising teaching and learning in Africa. The policy document endorses a DOTSS (Digital connectivity, Online and offline learning, Teachers as facilitators and motivators of learning, Safety online and in schools, and Skills focused learning) framework as a key innovation in mitigating the challenges of COVID-19. This framework would be entrenched through coordinated actions amongst African countries.

Although the AU framework is a positive step to promote online education, among others, one of the limitations in the proposed coordinated action relates to the omission of adult education. Given the omission, MOJA (which means 'one' in Swahili), a network of adult educators in Africa, and the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association (DVV International), a partner in adult education, suggested the need to develop a policy brief for submission to the AU as a mechanism for the inclusion of digitised learning and teaching in adult education.

To this end, a policy brief entitled, 'Digitalisation in Education: Bringing Adult Education into the Debate' was produced by DVV International and MOJA in January 2022. This article summarises key issues raised in the brief so that adult educators can quickly read and identify issues elaborated on in the longer version of the policy brief. Concerning the referencing in this summary, the in-text references and the reference list linked to the literature cited herein can be found in the original policy brief mentioned above.

The summarised version of the policy brief has the following elements, namely: the significance of adult education from a global perspective; the role of MOJA in advancing adult education in Africa; why adult education matters; the importance of digitalisation; digitalisation and the developing world; the need for African Union policy directives for digitalisation in education; and the embedding of technology in adult education practice.

Adult education as a global imperative

Adult education has been on the global education agenda since the 1970s. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) 1976 General Conference emphasised that "adult education as an integral part of life-long education can contribute decisively to economic and cultural development, social progress and world peace as well as to the development of educational systems" (UNESCO, 1976: n.p.).

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, based on reports from 40 African countries, indicates that interest in adult education has



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increased in African countries - almost 60 percent of the respondents indicated that there was progress in stakeholder participation by adult education professionals, educators, adult learners, governments, and businesses - but much more needs to be done to develop the field on the continent.

There are currently many organisations and individuals involved in various adult education initiatives in Africa, including DVV International, which supports various adult education initiatives across the continent. The institute has promoted flexible non-formal youth and adult education in South Africa since 1998. Moreover, DVV International represents approximately 900 adult education centres (Volkshochschulen) and their state associations, making it the biggest adult education and learning provider in Germany.

MOJA: Advancing adult education in Africa

To effectively advance adult education on the African continent, DVV International has created a pan-African platform for adult education professionals to share information and ideas. In 2021, DVV International and adult education professionals from different countries adopted

MOJA Adult Education Africa, an online platform for adult education practitioners in the public and private sectors, civil society, and academia in Africa, and for anyone else who is interested in lifelong learning. The MOJA online platform shares adult education resources, including books, articles, news, music, artworks, and events. MOJA does not belong to an individual, nor to a single organisation. The platform is owned and controlled by all those who are interested in advancing adult education on the African continent. MOJA seeks to facilitate network building across African borders and strongly believes that exchange and collaboration are the engine of learning, teaching, and collective action. The platform delivers dialogical and interactive educational platforms, namely blogs, chat rooms, and other interactive platforms for members to debate and dialogue with one another.

Why adult education matters

Adult education is very important for the following reasons:

1. Many people participate in adult education programmes for self-development and to be able to read, write, and count. Adult education practices have equipped individuals with the necessary skills and capabilities to participate in the economy and politics.
2. Members of working-class and impoverished communities who have participated in adult education programmes have played an important role in the development of community projects and campaigns that seek to socially and economically uplift marginalised communities and hold politicians, public administrators, and big businesses accountable.
3. For the Brazilian radical educator, Paulo Freire, education and literacy are not merely a technical exercise to enable adults to read and write, but they are also a tool to help adult learners analyse and change the context in which they live for the better.
4. Workers - precarious or not - are aided by adult education in the process of struggling for their

5. economic rights in the workplace.
5. International examples abound of marginalised groups, particularly women, who have used the knowledge and skills that they acquired in adult education to contribute towards community development. For example, the Barefoot College in India educates and trains women to produce and service solar system components aimed at providing energy and reducing carbon emission which damages the environment. The women then return to their communities to install solar systems in each house in the village.
6. According to UNESCO and the AU, adult education is a critical ingredient of social development, especially for women. It is generally accepted that economic growth on its own cannot eradicate poverty. Those who experience social and economic exclusion, especially Black poor and working women, need to actively influence social and economic outcomes through collective action. **Adult education stimulates participation in socio-economic change processes.** It increases adult Africans' prospects of accessing and benefiting from social and economic development programmes in public health, HIV treatment, and community development. Adults who access adult education are more likely to look after their families and communities.
7. Sweden has shown that the development of an adult education system is possible, and that it can contribute to skills development for young adult job-seekers. For example, the '*Study motivating folk high course*' supported young job-seekers to further their studies. After completing the course, approximately 40% of the learners either continued to participate in the programme or they found work. More than two-thirds of the participants of the course were inspired to continue and strongly felt that education was central to finding work in Sweden.

Digitalisation and its significance

It is important to differentiate between 'digitisation' and 'digitalisation'. *Digitisation* is the transformation of physical documents and information into digital formats. Digitisation entails transforming analogue information into a digital form. *Digitalisation*, on the other hand, entails transforming organisational processes and the functioning of organisations and structures into digital spaces using digital technologies. An example is the use of digital technologies and online learning to deliver educational programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The literature on digitalisation in education has increased prodigiously over the past 30 years. This is a function of the growing interest in online education around the world.

The pandemic has led to a significant increase in the use of digital pedagogies, especially in higher education. Many private adult education programmes have also moved online during the pandemic. In Africa, the pandemic has accelerated digitalisation on the continent. However, African countries are faced with many social and information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure-related challenges, which are a major barrier to digitalisation processes.

Digitalisation in the education in the developing world

As has been alluded to above, digitalisation has a growing footprint in the education systems of developing countries, including in those of African countries. Many developing countries have developed policy and legislative frameworks to guide the use of education technology long before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in most countries, especially on the African continent, as is indicated above, digitalisation within education has been hindered by the digital divide as a result of enduring socioeconomic challenges; a lack of digital infrastructure, especially

in rural areas; a lack of digital skills among teachers and learners; a lack of or unstable internet connectivity; and high electricity and mobile data costs.

The pandemic has highlighted the underlying structural and institutional barriers to digitalisation in education in South Africa. The digital divide, which mirrors enduring racial, class, and gender inequities in the education system, and the lack of teacher training in ICT and digital pedagogies, has undermined educational access and the quality of learning during the pandemic-related school closures. According to the Mail and Guardian (2021), only 30 percent of the country's learners in the basic education sector were able to access platforms used for online teaching and learning during school closures. Between 650 000 and 750 000 children aged 7 to 17 years did not attend school in May 2021. Moreover, the high cost of mobile data has made it difficult for university students to participate in online education. According to Cable.co.uk's 2021 report of worldwide mobile data pricing, the average price of 1GB in South Africa was \$2.67 (R39) in 2021. Gilbert (2021) observes: "Sub-Saharan Africa still has the most expensive data prices in the world".

Many African countries have developed policies and strategies to support and facilitate the use of technology in their education systems. We offer two more examples of digitalisation practices in education in African countries. The Ministry of Education and Sport in Uganda developed the Education Digital Agenda Strategy 2021-2025 to integrate technology into education and sports in the country. Some of the achievements so far include the installation of ICT laboratories in more than 1 000 rural schools, and approximately 3 896 teachers from mainly rural schools have received ICT skills training. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the uptake of open distance e-learning programmes in the country. The United Republic of Tanzania's Education and Training Policy (2014) seeks to increase the use of technology in teaching and learning and to ensure that educational institutions in the country are equipped with ICT infrastructure. Twenty-three higher education and research institutions were equipped

with network infrastructure in 2018, and online libraries have been set up at several universities. Moreover, the government announced last year that it intends to install computer laboratories in 1 500 new public secondary schools in 2022.

It is clear from several studies on digitalisation in education on the continent that African countries are faced with similar challenges. The lack of ICT infrastructure, inadequate training of teachers on the use of technology, especially for pedagogical purposes, the digital divide within and across countries, the non-availability of electricity in rural areas and urban informal settlements, and power outages are common barriers that inhibit online teaching and learning on the continent. The lack of access to electricity is "a major roadblock to the widespread deployment of digital education initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa specifically" (van Manen, et al., 2021:26).

Different authors point out that, as elsewhere in the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digitalisation process in education in India, and that digital skills levels have increased among teachers and learners. A possible reason for this is the reliance on technology for continued teaching and learning during the pandemic. Some of the digital educational tools used by the government for online teaching and learning are *eGyanKosh*, which is a national digital repository used by open and distance learning institutions to, *inter alia*, distribute digitalised learning materials, and *Gyandhara* which is an online platform used for synchronous online educational discussions.

Poor rural learners and students in Africa have been negatively affected by online teaching and learning due to the lack of access to digital devices. Additionally, many learners have dropped out of school because of socioeconomic hardship during the pandemic, with girls being more likely to drop out because of a lack of access to digital devices. The Right to Education Forum predicts that approximately 10 million girls may drop out of school in India because of infrastructure-related challenges; caste-related discrimination; and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or questioning (LGBTIQ) learners. The pandemic has also forced some of



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India's youth into child labour to financially support their struggling parents. Finally, adult education has not been considered for online teaching and learning.

African Union policy directives for digitalisation in education

The AU's specialised technical committee on education, science, and technology endorsed a set of guidelines that encourage member states to use the *Digital connectivity, Online and offline learning, Teachers as facilitators and motivators of learning* – the DOTSS framework – for developing context-specific digitalisation strategies that are appropriate for different education sectors.

The DOTSS framework highlights some of the key issues that member states need to address to ensure maximum access to online education, including investing in ICT infrastructure, strengthening and expanding internet connectivity, reducing or subsidising the cost of

mobile data, and providing digital training to educators. As important as these issues are, the guidelines seem overly focused on the technical aspects of online teaching and learning and less on social relations in education. **As a starting point, equity, empathy, and compassion should be the underpinning values of digitalisation in education. It means that the human aspect of education should not get lost in the technical details of digitalisation.**

The guidelines are largely silent on the issue of pedagogy. **It is important to adopt a holistic approach to digitalisation that goes beyond the use of technology in the delivery of content.** Decisions regarding technologies for online education should not be based solely on their accessibility to educators and students, but also on their appropriateness for supporting pedagogy and learning. Educators should work with technology and curriculum experts to develop digital pedagogies for lesson design, ensuring the inclusion of learners in online content delivery, and for learner feedback and assessments, among other things.

The guidelines acknowledge that online education is uncharted territory for many educators and students. To democratise education technology and guard against the dehumanisation of education, it is important that the experiences and views of educators are included in national digitalisation strategies and plans. It is necessary to develop targeted strategies for the digital inclusion of girls, women, and students with disabilities. The 2020 Afrobarometer survey shows that ownership of digital devices is gendered in most countries, with women more likely to own only a mobile phone. Member states should also develop comprehensive national policies for online education, including policies on the social well-being of educators and students, mobile data, skills development, access to and ownership of technological infrastructure, digitised content, etc.

The AU's guidelines encourage member states to avoid dependence on a particular technology company. Discussions about digitalisation should include conversations about the dangers of corporate capture of education and digital colonialism. Countries in the Global South

generally rely on the technologies of technology corporations in the United States of America. Their control of the digital ecosystem, and the lack of information protection laws in many African countries, render online educational activities vulnerable to data mining by northern technology corporations for commercial purposes.

Finally, the guidelines are silent on adult education. African representatives from 46 African countries at the CONFINTEA VI preparatory conference stated:

Youth and adult learning and education are an effective tool to develop Africa's people, impart appropriate skills (including vocational and technical skills), knowledge and attitudes among youth and adults in order to enable them to participate actively in the true integral development of their countries and the attainment of the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO, 2009:1).

Government has a responsibility to protect the right of adults to education. While African governments have made significant progress in the area of technical and vocational education and training since CONFINTEA VI, adult education, as the MOJA team points out, remains neglected in most African countries. Adult education is not being recognised, validated, and accredited in the education systems of most African countries, and it is being grossly underfunded. In addition, many countries lack policies on adult education. Notwithstanding the foregoing, it is encouraging that a considerable number of countries, especially in Southern Africa, are implementing policies and legislation on adult education, and many have improved the quality of their curricula, content, and pedagogical approaches.

Many African adults with low levels of education have lost their jobs or sources of income during the COVID-19 pandemic. Low skilled women workers and self-employed women informal workers have been the worst affected. Workplace closures and COVID-19 restrictions have halted or reduced non-formal and informal learning opportunities for low skilled and self-employed informal workers.

Adult education programmes have also been disrupted in most countries. And, considering the enduring digital divide of African countries, which, as we indicate above, is racialised, classed, and gendered, it is inconceivable that adult learners from marginalised communities will be able to participate in private online adult education courses. This situation will inevitably exacerbate educational inequality in African countries. Impoverished Black women and people with disabilities are likely to be most affected by changes in educational inequality.

Adult education has never been more important. For example, it can stimulate the collective imagination of youth and adults in poor communities, and enhance their capabilities and knowledge to develop community-based interventions for addressing hunger, food insecurity, and a lack of income, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Adult education can also contribute towards improving health literacy on COVID-19, especially in rural areas.

Embedding technology in adult education practice

We believe that if technology is to provide effective support to adult education in Africa, these key issues need to be considered:

1. Country-specific strategies and plans for online teaching and learning in adult education in line with the DOTSS framework.
2. Easily accessible technologies that could be used in online adult education, especially considering the lack of access to digital devices in rural areas (Kronke, 2020), and the digital skills required by adult learners.
3. Policies for online adult education.
4. Digital pedagogical approaches that will not undermine access, inclusion, and the quality of learning.
5. Collaborative partnerships to help finance online adult education.

Note: This document is a summary of the policy brief on adult education and digitalisation prepared for MOJA. The full policy brief is available on the MOJA digital platform at mojaeducation.net

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