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From Platform Crisis to Pedagogical Renaissance: MJDES and the New Digital Divide

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The inaugural volume of the *Multidisciplinary Journal of Distance Education Studies* (MJDES), published in 2022, provided an essential and timely assessment of the global pivot to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). It grounded the discourse in the empirical realities of Ghanaian and African Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) institutions, documenting the immediate challenges of quality perception (Bawa et al., 2022), institutional transition (Sedofia et al., 2022), and the logistical hurdles posed by school closures (Osae-Kwapong, 2022). Our first volume assessed the shockwave and the necessity of adaptation.

Volume 2, No. 1 (2024), however, marks a crucial and necessary shift. We move beyond simply reacting to the immediate platform crisis and confront the pedagogical renaissance demanded by two profound, interlinked forces that define the current era: the widespread rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) and the persistent infrastructural inequity that threatens to exacerbate a new digital divide. The research presented in this volume confirms that the challenges faced by ODeL are no longer merely about getting content online; rather, they are about transforming the nature of teaching, learning and assessment itself under the pressures of technological disruption. The central editorial argument for this volume is that the path to sustainable, high-quality ODeL in the Global South requires a disciplined focus on ethical assessment reform and equitable digital competency development that spans the entire educational pipeline, from basic schools to post-graduate programmes.

The Assessment Imperative: A Pivot from Proctoring to Pedagogy

The most immediate and critical tension highlighted in this volume stems from the crisis of assessment integrity in the age of intelligent tools. As Large Language Models (LLMs) offer students powerful, instant co-authorship capabilities, traditional standardised take-home assignments are rapidly becoming functionally unreliable. Meanwhile, the institutional response to this global pressure often defaults to enhanced surveillance, a reaction this volume scrutinises.

The paper by Nigerian scholars on Stakeholders' Perception on Remote Proctored Exam in Higher Educational Institutions provides a timely, empirical examination of this defensive approach. While remote proctoring aims to secure academic integrity, the study reveals the inherent friction and ethical concerns that arise when invasive surveillance tools intersect with the fundamental principles of open, flexible learning that ODeL is founded upon. These technology-intensive solutions are often expensive, demanding significant institutional capital; they are invasive, raising serious student privacy concerns; and they are potentially biased against distance learners who may have poor, unstable connectivity or limited personal space conducive to uninterrupted testing. Critically, these measures address the *symptom* (the potential for cheating) without curing the root *disease* (the continued reliance on outdated assessment design).

This observation leads directly to the pedagogical imperative that ODeL faculty must embrace. As Mudau and Van Wyk (2022) argued from a South African context in Volume 1, highlighting that the future lies in authentic assessment and AI simply accelerates the urgency of this transition. In this regard, the assessment must be designed to leverage, rather than resist, AI:

1. Shift from Reproduction to Critical Synthesis: Assessments must pivot to tasks that require localised context, high-level, human-centric synthesis, and personal reflection that current AI models cannot authentically replicate. This means creating assignments focused on analysis, critique, ethical reasoning, and application within the learner's specific cultural or professional environment.
2. Redefining Academic Honesty as Intelligent Agency: Instead of simply prohibiting AI use, assessment should be designed to require its use. Tasks should demand students to *critique* an AI-generated response, *edit* a piece of code or argument written by an LLM, or use AI as a tool to rapidly prototype a solution and then reflect rigorously on the specific processes, prompts, and tools they employed. This moves the student from being a passive consumer of knowledge to an active manager of intelligence, a skill far more relevant to the 21st-century workplace than ever before.

The ultimate goal, fueled by this journal's commitment to evidence-based practice, is to demonstrate that pedagogical innovation is a far more robust, equitable, and educationally valuable defense against academic dishonesty than mere surveillance technology.

Bridging the Competency Gap

The second major contribution of Volume 2 is its emphasis on the breadth and depth of digital competency across the entire educational pipeline. Understanding ODeL student success requires looking back to the foundational skills acquired in earlier schooling. To this end, the study by Adu-Marfo and Asamoah. "Teaching

with Digital Technology in Basic Schools in Ghana: Identities, Challenges and Implications in a Digital Era," offers a vital bottom-up perspective. Their findings reveal that the digital identity of students in basic schools is often misunderstood by their teachers. Consequently, teachers perceive students as "digital natives" based on superficial factors like birth era and usage frequency, ignoring the deeper digital literacy skills required for critical evaluation, academic research and responsible technology use. This perception gap creates a cascading competence challenge that directly impacts the readiness of university distance learners in diverse ways including:

1. **Basic School Limitations:** Teachers struggle profoundly with limited resources, lack of training, and reluctance to change, hindering the development of foundational digital literacy and critical thinking in young learners. The recommended paradigm shift from traditional methods to innovative modes is often thwarted by systemic inertia.
2. **The Inherited ODeL Challenge:** Distance learning centres subsequently inherit a student body that may be adept at social media but lacks the academic [functional] digital literacy required to navigate a complex LMS effectively (Odame, 2022), engage in robust online collaboration (Sedofia et al., 2022), or use AI tools ethically and productively (Kareem, 2025). The quality of ODeL (Bawa et al., 2022) cannot be isolated from the quality of the incoming student's foundational digital preparedness.

This volume stresses that ODeL institutions must develop more rigorous and context-specific digital readiness assessments for incoming students and, crucially, integrate remedial digital literacy training into core curriculum offerings. The digital revolution is not achieved by installing hardware. Instead, it is achieved by systematically building human capacity.

Equitable Infrastructure and Policy Deployment of AI

The challenge of access, a constant thread throughout ODeL history, is exponentially magnified by the introduction of AI. This is by virtue of the fact that AI, with its vast computational and data requirements, threatens to widen the existing digital divide between high-resource and low-resource institutions, particularly across Africa. For instance, the paper on the Potential of AI-Driven Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in African Higher Education Institutions provides the necessary aspirational counterpoint. It argues convincingly that AI offers a mechanism to personalise learning at scale and address the sheer volume of students required by mass education. AI-powered chatbots, adaptive tutoring systems, and personalised feedback loops could drastically improve outcomes for students who currently receive minimal one-on-one time with faculty.

However, realising this potential requires a confrontation with the painful realities documented in Online Learning in Distance Education: The Plight of Distance Learners in Ghana. This study established that no amount of advanced AI can overcome the challenge of unreliable power, high data costs or poor connectivity. The *plight* of the distance learner, facing logistical hurdles that often impede the learning process, must be the primary filter through which AI solutions are evaluated. Therefore, the equitable deployment of AI mandates a new focus for ODeL research:

- **Sustainability Research:** We need rigorous studies that evaluate the cost-benefit, energy consumption, and return on investment of AI systems. Priority must be given to developing and adopting lightweight, bandwidth-conscious AI tools that can function effectively in low-connectivity environments.
- **Ethical Governance:** AI adoption is a policy challenge before it is a technical one. To sidestep this, institutions must develop clear, transparent governance models regarding student data privacy, algorithm accountability and intellectual property in a co-created environment. This is hinged on the basis that AI is not a neutral tool, so its integration must be guided by African ODeL values of equity, access and social development.

The Multidisciplinary Mandate of MJDES

The successful navigation of the post-ERT, AI-driven era demands a commitment to interdisciplinary inquiry, the very foundation of MJDES. This volume demonstrates a necessary integration across three academic pillars:

1. **The Pedagogical Pillar (The 'What' and 'How'):** Led by identity challenges and implications and the studies on proctoring, this pillar demands that we reimagine assessment and commit to fostering critical digital competence, ensuring that technology serves learning outcomes, not the reverse.
2. **The Technological Pillar (The 'Tool' and 'Scale'):** Driven by the VLE and online learning plight studies, this pillar focuses on the equitable, sustainable, and infrastructural requirements for effective digital delivery, insisting that solutions must fit the context, not the fantasy.
3. **The Policy Pillar (The 'Mandate' and 'Ethics'):** Informed by the systemic challenges observed across both basic and higher education, this pillar requires governmental and institutional leadership to establish long-term funding, continuous professional development and ethical policy frameworks that guarantee AI enhances educational access rather than restricting it.

In conclusion, Volume 2, No. 1 (2024) of the *Multidisciplinary Journal of Distance Education Studies* serves as a critical call to action. It invites us to move beyond managing the residual fallout of the pandemic and the defensive posture of proctoring. Hence, we must seize the revolutionary potential of AI, not as a shortcut, but as a powerful lever for pedagogical transformation and radical personalisation. This is hinged on our mission to provide the empirical ground for policy and practice to evolve, ensuring that distance education continues to champion equity and access by developing the competent, critically thinking digital citizens who will define the next era of ODeL in Africa and across the globe.

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