



ONLINE
CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

A Model of a Possible Future
of African Christian College



Meet Fadziso, Bongi & Mukisa

They are three students at Online Christian University.

The three of them met last year in a course on Spiritual Formation, one of their first courses as university students. Though they've never met face-to-face (they live way too far from each other!), they became close friends during the spiritual formation course.

It was during that course they realised what a blessing it was to be enrolled in a Christian university – not just any institution. Through the learning activities, practice of spiritual disciplines, personal reflection, and reading and writing they found themselves growing closer to God and more committed in their following of Jesus.

And, because of being placed in a group together in the course, the three of them also built a friendship. They shared ideas and struggles as well as resources for assignments. Fadziso still remembers when Mukisa from Uganda and Bongi from eSwatini called her on WhatsApp to pray for her when her grandmother passed on in the village in Zimbabwe. The three of them stayed connected through social media over the past year because they had not been in class together since . . . until now.



Bongi works the evening shift

as a server at a restaurant in eSwatini. He's studying engineering at Online Christian University. He hopes to find a job and a wife after graduation.

When he first started his studies, he was worried that not having a computer of his own would make it very difficult for him to complete his work. Fortunately, he found that the university's programme was designed for mobile learning. Though he occasionally needs to go to the local internet café, he can do most of his work from his mobile phone.

He's excited about his Intro to the New Testament course that is starting – mainly because Mukisa and Fadziso are in his class again.



Mukisa is grateful to be a student

at Online Christian University. As a preacher for a growing congregation, he realised he needed more knowledge and better skills for his ministry.

His wife and kids have been supportive of him studying at Online Christian University because it allowed them to stay at home together rather than Mukisa going off to study or uprooting the family to travel to a far-away university.

It also allowed him to keep his job as a pastor at the church which is also supporting his studies. He has flexibility to complete his work at times in the day when other responsibilities are not as pressing.



Fadziso, a single lady, gets up

early each morning to head to a factory where she works as a seamstress. In the evenings (and sometimes late into the night), she studies.

Fadziso dreams of owning her own business someday, manufacturing and selling her fashion creations. She is thankful that she has been able to work while also studying business management.

As a dedicated Christian, Fadziso is most thankful that she is also studying theology and that even her business course is built on a strong, Christian foundation. She was already looking forward to taking another Bible course, and when she logged in the Intro to the New Testament course and saw Bongi and Mukisa's profile picture in her list of classmates, she was filled with even more joy to see these good friends there.



Online Christian University's programme

schedules students to take one subject at a time for about 8 weeks. All course work is completed online. Sometimes video lectures are to be watched. When possible, students can watch the lectures live and participate in a discussion with the lecturer and classmates. When it's not possible, watching the recorded lecture later is also an option.

Often, the courses include group work with students from across Africa. The course is not centred around lectures, though, and often assignments are real-life projects connected to student lives.

If you asked Mukisa what he appreciates most about Online Christian University, he is quick to talk about the resources and textbooks they use in the course. The university is dedicated to Open Source and electronic resources for all their subjects and disciplines. This means Mukisa never has to purchase a textbook or pay for course materials – only tuition fees and his internet data. In some disciplines – especially Mukisa's theology subjects – the university has a staff dedicated to creating and



Fadziso also appreciates the Open Source resources, but to her, what sets Online Christian University apart is the student support.

Almost immediately after expressing interest in applying, someone from the university contacted Fadziso to answer questions and help her through the application and enrolment process.

She was surprised that it didn't stop once she became a student. If a week goes by without her logging into a course, someone from the university contacts her to make sure she's alright. Late one night, when trying to complete an assignment, Fadziso had trouble submitting her paper, but someone was available to help her with her problem – even at 2 A.M.!

Being new to online learning and not too tech-savvy, she was worried about how everything would work, but the student support from Online Christian University helped her fears vanish and made it easier for her to focus on learning about business instead of struggling with technology.

‘The lecturers are awesome!’ says Bongi. ‘I’ve

had lecturers who live in different parts of Africa and all over the world. One of my engineering classes was even in partnership with a US-based university. Our class was mixed with students from another university which was fun.’

‘All the lecturers approach our subject from a Christian view and focus on more than just academic knowledge – they care about us, what kind of people we are, and how the subject applies to our lives as Africans today.’

The lecturers at Online Christian University are experienced and credentialed. Not only do many have terminal degrees in their discipline, but all lecturers have been certified for teaching online – which requires a different set of skills than classroom teaching.

What students don’t realise is that the university has a team of instructional design and media creation specialists that support the lecturers to create the best online learning experiences for each subject.





At least once a quarter, local gatherings are held for students at Online Christian University. In some places they meet monthly or weekly. This is a time for students to get to meet others who are studying online at the university. For instance, Fadziso attends a gathering in Harare for Online Christian University students whenever possible. The event is filled with powerful worship and a great speaker and oftentimes lecturers and staff from the university attend. It's a great way to build relationships with other students from her country and begin to build networks and connections.

Online Christian University holds regional graduation ceremonies so that students can experience graduation with their family and friends. But many students choose to attend the main graduation ceremony at the university's campus in eSwatini.

Before becoming a fully online university, the campus was home to a small university college. But now the campus serves as the headquarters for the university – not for classes.

It has offices for the administration, marketing, recruiting, student support, lecturer support, and resource creation staff.

A big hall for graduation has been built and the university rents out the hall and other venues on campus for events, retreats, seminars, and weddings.

At the end of their studies, Fadziso, Bongi, and Mukisa

decide to attend the main graduation in eSwatini. They meet each other face-to-face for the first time at graduation – along with other friends, classmates, and some of their lecturers.

They love seeing the campus – especially the massive Tree of Life Project and its macadamia nut trees that help the university provide such quality educational experiences.

Each one of them is overwhelmed, though, at the number of graduates. They knew there were many academic disciplines and faculties at Online Christian University, but because everything was done online it never occurred to them how many students there really were.

Nor had they known how diverse the student body really was -- there are students from many African nations graduating with degrees from the various disciplines.

Even though they studied online, it still felt like they were among family at graduation.



In Defence of Online Education

The Opportunity

Distance education is not new; it's over 200 years old! It has a long history, established educational theories, and a growing amount of research-based practices to support its use. Technological developments have made it easier and more affordable to connect students with a diversity of learning experiences across the globe. As a result, it has seen tremendous growth over the past two decades.

Distance education is considered to have great potential across Africa because it offers flexibility, access, and opportunity on a continent that is already under-served with educational opportunities.

Only 5% of African youth enrol in higher education. There are many factors that lead to this. Online learning addresses several of the key factors:

- ◆ **Access.** Online study makes educational opportunities available to students in almost any part of Africa with internet availability. On average, over a third of Africans access the internet. The 'Digital in 2018' report shows that 51% of the population of Southern Africa has internet access and 27% of East Africa. To be most effective in Africa, online learning should focus on mobile platforms as 68% of Africans have a mobile phone, with higher penetration in Southern Africa than average.
- ◆ **Living expenses.** The additional costs of travel, student housing, and other provisions are reduced or eliminated by making study accessible to the student at home.
- ◆ **Educational expenses.** A commitment to quality Open Source materials further reduces the costs for students to learn by making their learning materials freely available. Facilities and housing expenses are reduced for the university that can help reduce tuition but are balanced in some ways by technology infrastructure costs.
- ◆ **Qualifications.** An online higher education programme will not enable students who do not qualify for university admission to qualify . . . unless it also works to create a programme for provisional enrolment or upgrading student qualifications.

A quality, accredited, and committed online higher education programme has the potential to close the gap on providing higher learning opportunities across Africa in ways that a residential programme could never accomplish. Sustainably reaching large numbers of students across Africa in a shorter period of time is much more feasible than a residential campus model.

The Educational Experience

Many people assume that online education cannot be an adequate replacement for traditional classroom learning. This is odd because our current systems of university structure are not ancient

themselves. For centuries, knowledge was passed down through stories in the kraal, through apprenticeships with professionals, and through other means.

The current system of ‘seat hours’ – where credits and learning are measured by the number of hours a student sits in class for lectures is under great pressure globally and is being challenged by many educators and institutions. (The Just Do It Christian University model already presented as a potential future also ignores traditional educational expectations.)

Research has consistently found that content and instructional methods are much more important than the medium. Educational researcher Richard Clark summed up the evidence with this analogy in *Review of Educational Research* in 1983 and again in 2012:

The best current evidence is that media are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in nutrition . . . only the content of the vehicle can influence achievement.

This means that if student learning in a classroom is better than student learning online it is not because the learning took place online – it is more likely because the content or instructional methods used in the classroom were better suited for the classroom than the content or instructional methods used online were suited for online.

The key, then, is not to try to make identical learning experiences for online learning as the traditional classroom. Online learning will look different than a classroom experience – just like an apprenticeship model of hands-on learning will look different than a classroom experience. But learning still occurs at equivalent levels – and even more so when students are committed to success and take responsibility for their learning, a requirement for successful online learning.

Personal Formation

We are clear on our mission and Ends in our visioning process. Whatever vision we choose will be consistent in helping African Christian College partner with God to accomplish its mission and Ends.

The most important End goal we have is that our graduates demonstrate Christian character. According to Board Policy, this means that graduates ‘substantially grow in Christlikeness’, ‘show love of God’ and ‘love of neighbour,’ and ‘put Christ ahead of any conflicting cultural heritage.’

Other Ends include servant leadership, global awareness, and personal resourcefulness. These are all qualities that point to character or personal formation. They go beyond academic performance or knowledge acquisition and speak to the type of people our graduates have become. This is what we’re about.

To many, this expectation creates a significant problem for online learning. The assumption is that online learning – and distance education in general – is not suitable for personal formation, particularly spiritual formation.

Relationships are at the core of personal and spiritual formation. Our relationship with God and with other people shape us into the people we are becoming. We generally think of relationships as something we have with people who are standing in front of us. And, critics of online learning are quick to assume that one cannot have a meaningful relationship online.

And, yet, we build and maintain relationships with others online every day. Most of the students and staff currently at African Christian College live far from our family, friends, and communities. Yet, we maintain connection, contact, and relationship with these people through e-mail, WhatsApp chats and calls, and other technology. This is the same technology that online learning uses.

That is not to claim that online relationships are identical to face-to-face relationships. They are not the same. Just because online relationships are different, does not mean they are not meaningful. Online learning is not just like chatting on Facebook, just like going to class isn't the same as talking with someone over tea.

Furthermore, we may think far more highly of our traditional classroom model as a place of personal and spiritual formation than we should. At least, we have no evidence to show its effectiveness. When lecturers simply claim 'I can tell' when referring to a student's character or development from observation in a classroom setting, they are guessing at best and may simply be fooling themselves. Many can tell stories of being surprised by the student who unexpectedly 'went bad' after graduation without considering whether they had a complete misreading of the student from the beginning (the same is true for the numerous students of great character and success who were misjudged by educators in class).

The truth is, we've done little to measure spiritual or character formation at universities, even at Christian colleges and universities. We don't really know if our strategies and activities are working – nor whether they work better than the strategies we might use in an online learning environment. We may be building our arguments on our experience and assumptions rather than a fair assessment of reality.

What does research tell us about the process of personal formation in university settings? Firstly, that most of it happens outside of the classroom and even off-campus in relationships with family, friends, work, and church. At African Christian College currently, many of these relationships (work, friends, church) are part of the campus community. Depending on our future size, however, that may not be sustainable.

The other thing we know is that students bring more of who they are with them as students than they take out. That shouldn't lead us to despair or to discount the impact the university experience gives. Instead, we must be realistic about what changes we can expect from a student oriented in the wrong direction upon arrival. That's one reason why ACC only enrolls Christians active in a local congregation as students.

As a final observation about spiritual formation in distance education, we turn to this quote from Joel Green, dean of the School of Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary:

Paul wrote one of his most weighty letters to Christians living in a city he had never visited, to Christians most of whom he had never met. James and Peter wrote to Christians scattered across whole regions of the Roman world. Does this make the Letter to the Romans or 1 Peter or James less legitimate? Through our engagement with those letters today, aren't we being transformed? That's the kind of engagement that online education invites.