ABSTRACT

The issue of manpower development is one that developing countries have been grappling with for many years. But as they climb this 'greasy pole' the greatest challenge is how to sustain the climb through a 'misty film' that keeps the destination out of sight. Some educational economists have observed that at least 12-15% of a nation's workforce must have tertiary education if it is going to compete in the new global economy. They also add that 'Seeking to meet this demand requires a conceptualization of massification (through education) that is not currently under consideration' (Taferra and Altbach, 2003:74). A current debate on the way to meet this demand is the use of open learning. This has mutated through time from correspondence education, through distance education to e-Learning.

But reading research rationales from graduate students one comes across statements like 'Educational systems around the world are under increasing pressure to use new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to teach students the knowledge and skills they need in the 21st century.

Marshall McLuhan(1964) on the other hand used a philosophical discourse that posited that the very presence of a technology is the message that a new presence has arrived to determine new relationships and operations. He was derided as a 'technological determinist' while he himself insisted that those who resisted such change were 'technological idiots'.

This paper combines both positions by looking at the development of open learning at the University of Nairobi over the past one five decades. The study divides the period into three sections, that is, the primordial phase of correspondence education where the University of Nairobi participated in the Government of Kenya In-service training of primary school teachers between 1969 and 1982 through the use of print and radio, the second phase is the external degree programme from 1983 through the use of print and audio-cassettes while from the turn of the new millennium where e-Learning is taking centre stage. A strand running through the three phases is a new thesis called 'Transitional Thinking' where the new approach is inchoate to the adopting system but where the entry of a donor ignites and sustains some interest.

The paper concludes that what has been missing on this journey is the 'historical perspective' and proposes that the University and the country should now take this dimension seriously, analyzing the various international debates as the communication technologies have emerged and proliferated and also to acknowledge the critical role of instructional designers in the success of every educational innovatio