

Open and Distance Learning in the Twenty First Century: a Commonwealth Perspective



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Introduction

It is an honour to speak to such a distinguished audience. I have prepared this presentation jointly with my President Sir John Daniel, and I bring to you his greetings.

Our title today is *Open and Distance Learning in the 21st Century*. Even though distance education has been in existence for over 150 years, yet it is only in the last forty years that its growth has been so phenomenal. Today open and distance learning or ODL is seen as a cost effective tool for providing education and training at all levels and for a variety of disciplines and professions. This has been due largely to developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs) which have made it possible to make effective pedagogic interventions for providing unlimited flexible learning options to different constituencies of learners. We will hear from three major institutions, the UK Open University, the Open University of Malaysia and Wawasan Open University about how they are extending the frontiers of ODL to meet the changing need of the twenty first century.

In this presentation, we shall begin by outlining three key trends, move on to list three achievements and three challenges before we come to the conclusions.

The Growth of Distance Learning

The first trend is the sheer growth of open and distance learning in the Commonwealth. Participation in higher education today is at a record high. Higher education has evolved from an elitist pursuit into a mass aspiration. Pundits say that by 2020, 40% of the global workforce will be knowledge workers, with a need for tertiary qualifications.

The World Bank now estimates that for countries to achieve sustainable economic development, the Age Participation Rates (APRs) in higher education must be in the region of 40 to 50%, but APRs are less than 10% of the relevant age group in most of South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa.

Many developing countries have big ambitions for growth. Malaysia plans to raise its APRs to 40% by 2010. Trinidad and Tobago plans to have an APR of 60% by 2015, while Jamaica, more modestly, wants to raise it to 30% by the same date. India has announced the establishment of one new central university for each of its 28 states with the intention of lifting the APR to 15% by 2012 (Daniel, Kanwar, and Uvalic-Trumbic, 2006, pp. 17-23).

But can the existing institutions cater to the rising demand? Dhaka University, Bangladesh could only enrol 10,000 of the 80,000 applicants in 2000, while in Kenya only 9,000 of the 40,000 qualified students could be accommodated in the public university system (Kapur and Crowley, 2008, p.16).

Building more brick and mortar institutions to cope with such demand is not a viable option for most countries. They need alternative approaches. One such approach was the establishment of open universities.

The University of South Africa (UNISA) started its distance education operations in 1946. It is one of the world's mega-universities – an expression coined by Sir John Daniel, to describe distance teaching universities with over 100,000 students. But it was the establishment of the UK Open University in 1969 that led ODL to expand phenomenally in the seventies and eighties. It quickly became the largest university in Britain and set a global trend.

Canada created three open universities in the 1970s. Pakistan was quick off the mark. India followed with BRAOU and in 1985 established a national open university, IGNOU, followed by numerous state open universities. Bangladesh is a more recent arrival in the open university club. Many of these open universities are mega-universities.

In 1994, there were eleven mega-universities in the world with a collective enrolment of about 3 million students (Daniel, 1996). Today the number of mega-universities has doubled and student enrolments have tripled and new mega-universities are on the horizon. Six African countries are planning to establish open universities in the next three years. Ghana and Mauritius have already made substantial progress.

If we look just at the Commonwealth, we can see a phenomenal growth in the number of open universities between 1988 and today.

But higher education at a distance is not an enterprise just limited to open universities. In all countries conventional educational institutions, most notably at university level, are adding ODL activities to their face-to-face teaching and becoming 'dual-mode' institutions. Some countries, for example Australia have a long tradition of this in universities such as Queensland, New England, and Deakin with more recent converts such as Southern Queensland and Monash. The University of Delhi has a large Campus of Open Learning with student enrolments in the range of 150,000. The University of South Pacific and the

University of West Indies are multi-modal institutions and cater to both face-to-face and distance students on a regional basis.

However, some institutions are evolving in other ways. Dedicated distance education institutions such as the Open University of Hong Kong are now offering face-to-face classes. In Canada, the single-mode ODL institutions in Québec and British Columbia, the Télé-université and the Open University of British Columbia, have been merged with conventional institutions. Eleven new schools in India's IGNOU are now offering face to face courses. Are these isolated instances or is this an emerging trend? More importantly, can distance education thrive in a dual-mode set-up?

There is a real risk that distance teaching universities, which go in the other direction by adding classroom teaching, may see the quality of their distance offerings deteriorating. It is too early to make a definitive overall judgement, but it is clear that the distance programmes have lost momentum in the dual-mode situations in Quebec and British Columbia whereas the single-mode Athabasca University goes from strength to strength.

Loss of momentum and quality would be particularly disastrous, especially in countries where the open universities were set up in order to do quality distance education in contrast to the many dual mode universities offering correspondence courses of lamentable quality.

We leave you with that thought and move to the second trend.

ODL for Development

In the year 2000 the international community agreed on two sets of development objectives: the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Dakar Goals of Education for All (EFA). Let us now turn to the contribution that ODL can make in attaining these goals.

In this decade the main focus has been on the goal of achieving Universal Primary Education (MDG 2). Good progress is being made. Compared to 1999, 40 million more children are now in primary schools. That is a great success. But it is generating two major challenges for governments.

Many African countries have launched major initiatives to introduce free primary education. But what happens when students graduate from elementary schools? Can the existing schools absorb the additional large numbers? When Kenya introduced free primary education in 2003, 1.5 million out-of-school children entered the 18,000 schools already bursting at the seams. While 73% survive the elementary school, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the secondary level is 48%.

Open schooling can address the challenges of increased demand by reaching out to diverse groups of learners with quality secondary education that offers academic as well as technical and vocational options. For example, India has one national open school with an annual enrolment of 300,000 pupils and 16 state open schools that cater to over 2 million learners. Open schooling cannot only reach large numbers but can also provide cost-effective education of quality with high retention rates of up to 90%.

The second challenge is to achieve universal primary education in all countries. This requires many more teachers. Africa alone still needs to raise its current stock of teachers by 68% – from 2.4 to 4 million – by 2015 to reach that goal (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006). India needs 5 million more. Once again the conventional approaches cannot cope with these huge numbers.

This is a pan-Commonwealth challenge. In addition, of course, many teachers are untrained or under-qualified: 44% in Nigeria, 42% in The Gambia and 63% in Uganda. Existing teacher training institutions do not have the capacity to address these shortfalls, so it is critical to expand the use of ODL to teacher training.

But ODL for development is not only, perhaps not mainly either, about strengthening formal education. Of the 1.1 billion people living on less than \$1 a day, 75% live in rural areas and rely on agriculture for food and income.

80% of the farm work is done by women. ODL can contribute to poverty reduction by the development of skills training packages for poor communities. Our organisation the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has developed an initiative to promote Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F). The initiative links universities, research institutes, ICT kiosks and banks with rural communities in India, Sri Lanka and Kenya supporting farmers to learn and earn.

In one recent project in Theni district, India, 582 women participants access distance learning audio-visual materials to learn the fundamentals of identifying a good cow, dairy and disease management as well as how to exercise credit and insurance options.

Nearly 300 participants received credit worth over US\$ 15,000 with which two and a half thousand goats were bought. 25% of the loans have already been repaid in the very first year of the project. So what happens when COL leaves? An earlier intervention shows that after COL completed the project, 50 women farmers continued to access information through the local ICT kiosk and have sold milk worth over US\$ 100,000, which has contributed to the prosperity of the village.

Open Educational Resources (OERs)

We come now to our third trend. A key trend today is eLearning. The last ten years have seen tectonic shifts in how technology is being used in education. The Open Courseware movement was launched with the prestige of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology which, by sharing the lecture notes of its faculty online, expressed the principle that knowledge is our common wealth.

The on-line course materials of the UK Open University were the second generation as existing self-instructional materials were made freely available in on-line format.

The third generation is collaborative course development as exemplified by the WikiEducator, a course authoring tool being used to develop materials for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) and many other projects.

In Africa, for example, one of the most successful collections of OERs is those developed and disseminated by the Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) Consortium. It has 18 member-institutions in nine African countries. TESSA has developed a wide variety of audio and text materials (online and print) that provide support to primary school teachers and teacher educators in Africa.

Can OERs contribute to improved teaching and learning? Professor Bob Bernard of the Educational Technology group at Concordia University, Montreal, and his colleagues carried out a meta-analysis of hundreds of studies in which distance education students were treated in different ways. They distinguished three types of interaction: student – content; student – student; and student – teacher. They then analysed all the studies to find which type of interaction made the greatest difference to student performance when it was increased.

The results were very clear. Increasing *student – content* interaction had the greatest effect; with *student – student* interaction coming next and *student – teacher* interaction last. Within this context, the importance of content cannot be underestimated. In the coming years, there will be a greater need to collaborate on free content development and sharing resources.

Achievements

So much for our section on trends: we come now to three achievements of ODL

Breaking the Iron Triangle of Access, Quality and Costs

The first is to have broken open the iron triangle of access, quality and costs. Throughout history, education has been constrained by the iron triangle of access, quality and cost. If access is increased, there is the danger of lowering quality. If this is to be avoided, then the costs would have to be raised. ODL is revolutionary because it allows us, through division of labour, specialization, and economies of scale, to reconfigure the access-quality-cost triangle.

Access can be increased, quality can be improved and costs can be cut, all at the same time.

In terms of quality, the case of the UK Open University is instructive. Independent rankings of the quality of the teaching programmes in UK universities put the Open University in 5th place out of 100 institutions. Furthermore, cost studies conducted by the UK government show that whichever way the calculations were done, the total cost of the Open University degree is substantially less than in conventional institutions.

Collaboration

The second achievement that we must flag is collaboration. One of the UKOU's early contributions to the practice of ODL was the team approach to course development. This meant that teams of subject experts,

instructional designers, media producers, and editors worked together to create quality content. In a Web 2.0 world this has mutated into collaborative content development on wikis and basecamps.

At the institutional level, there is more collaboration with older institutions providing their content and resources to newer universities. In India, IGNOU has made its course materials available to the State Open Universities for further adoption and adaptation. As the pool of open educational resources grows, this type of collaboration will increase further.

Public Private Partnerships

A third achievement is partnerships between the public and private sectors. The changing character of higher education has led to the evolution of differentiated types of HEI's. Many countries have ended the state monopoly on higher education by encouraging private providers to develop. This has resulted not only in the emergence of private distance education providers, but also in increased partnerships between public and private institutions.

Look at the interesting case of the Open University of Malaysia (OUM), a private institution, which is a consortium of 11 public sector HEIs. This model promotes: i) collaboration among public-private institutions thereby pooling academic talent; ii) economies of scale which are critical to the cost-effectiveness of a DE operation; and iii) a win-win situation by making academics business partners in a joint enterprise.

Challenges

Those are our choice for three key trends and three key achievements in open and distance learning. Let us now look at the challenges. We see three in particular.

Graduation Rates

The first challenge is graduation and completion rates. There are several instances of ODL systems that have taken off with great promise and potential. However, there have also been instances of a serious disconnect between promise and performance. Wider access is not synonymous with success. Success is reflected in the outcomes measured in terms of the ratio of graduates to enrolment, the time taken to complete a programme, the ratios of retention and dropout, and the response of the market to the graduates.

Graduation rates from some of the high-enrolment open universities are disproportionately low. It is very easy to become complacent once enrolments are high. Our aim must be access to success.

Recognition of Qualifications

Second, success in getting students to graduate is not enough. Their qualifications must be recognised and valued by society. Recognition of qualifications is just as important as the performance levels. ODL degrees and certificates need to enjoy the same status and recognition for the purposes of employment and further studies as conventional systems both within national jurisdictions as well as globally.

Provisions need to be made in the national policies for according the necessary equivalence to ODL qualifications. While research shows that there is ‘no significant difference’ between distance education and traditional classroom instruction in relation to student outcomes, there is still a perception barrier to be overcome.

Research

What is the nature of research that open universities conduct? There are open universities that are engaged in disciplinary research with considerable success. The UK Open University is rated among the top fifty British universities for excellence in research. But there are many open universities that struggle with a variety of challenges. Some of the more commonly reported impediments are inadequate technology infrastructures, lack of human capacity, deficiencies in planning and management and inadequacies of teaching and learning resources.

It would be worthwhile for ODL institutions to start their research work on ODL itself by systematically recording their experiences in all aspects of the implementation of their programmes and tracking the progress of their learners. Such an effort could also help develop a body of best practices, identify strategic issues, analyse learner response and experiences, design effective support systems and appropriate student assessment procedures and practices. Research into these aspects would give ODL institutions a leadership position in improving the quality of mainstream tertiary institutions.

Conclusion

Let us conclude. While in the educationally advanced and resource-rich countries, ODL provides a more convenient learner-driven model of education, in the developing countries, challenged by inadequate resources, ODL is a cost-effective option that can reach out to larger numbers without major constraints of time and place.

The coming decades, we estimate, will be marked by both certainties and uncertainties.

What appears certain is that:

1. while establishing its academic credibility progressively, ODL will become increasingly important as it becomes prominent at all levels of formal education and training—especially at the secondary and tertiary levels;
2. ODL will be used increasingly for development and in non-formal settings;

3. there will be more emphasis on the ‘open’ rather than the distance aspect of ODL; and
4. ODL will promote, foster and sustain significant changes in curricula, learner clientele, and pedagogies.

What is not certain, however, is:

1. how governments and communities will respond to these impending changes in terms of legislative and financial provisions;
2. how long it will take for us to change our mindset to fully benefit from the change being spearheaded by ODL; and
3. how information and communication technologies will grow and develop in the coming decades and how they will impact ODL in general and learning outcomes in particular.

We hope that these are some of the issues that this conference will help us to address.

Thank you

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