

Developing a National ODL Policy: an international perspective



13 May 2016

Keynote delivered at the at the international seminar to develop Pakistan's first ever National Policy for Open and Distance Learning Allama Iqbal Open University (AIU), Pakistan

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Vice Chancellor, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour to be here at an institution named after the great Allama Iqbal and I thank Prof Shahid Siddiqui and his team, for the invitation. I am particularly grateful to Zahid Majeed for the efforts he made to ensure that I got here! I'm pleased to be this important meeting and look forward to bringing an international perspective as you consider various options for developing a national ODL policy.

Let me begin with a brief introduction to the Commonwealth of Learning or COL which is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government. Our headquarters are in Metro Vancouver and we have a regional office the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in New Delhi.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to harness the potential of distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training. Pakistan is an active member of the Commonwealth and has been consistent in its financial and intellectual contributions to COL. Thank you, Pakistan.

COL has an international Board of Governors, which includes eminent representatives from the four regions of the Commonwealth. Prof Atta Ur Rahman represents Asia and Chairs our Audit Committee with great distinction.

Allama Iqbal Open University (AIU), a pioneer of distance learning in Asia, is one of the founding institutions that developed a joint Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme along with institutions in Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. This programme is now offered in 11 countries.

Last year, in collaboration with the Higher Education Council (HEC) and British Council, Pakistan, COL conducted a leadership training for Vice Chancellors of 15 universities in Pakistan. This resulted in concrete partnerships among the participating Vice Chancellors.

COL developed a Review and Improvement Model for the self-assessment of institutions and this was implemented successfully in Fatima Jinnah Women's University and AIU. There was an exchange of

faculty members between these two institutions as they followed up on the recommendations of the external review.

This year, COL launched a project called Girls Inspire, in partnership with SPARC and Bedari to support skills development for girls and women. This project involves providing secondary school opportunities for girls and women to prevent child early and forced marriage in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania. This project is being supported by Canada and Australia.

The Virtual University of Pakistan had organized the 3rd ELDEC conference in March this year to discuss the evolution, challenges and solutions relating to eLearning and Distance Education. I'm very grateful to Prof Naveed Malik for having invited me as this event, which also discussed policy, and was an appropriate precursor to this meeting.

My presentation today will begin with a brief review of the context—which includes demography, the status of tertiary education and technology in Pakistan. I will then look at what we mean by Open and Distance Learning or ODL. Today we are in the fifth decade of ODL—what have been the major developments so far? I will then turn to the crisis of credibility that still haunts ODL in many developing countries and share examples of what others have done in terms of assuring quality. Finally, we will consider our options as we move towards a national and institutional ODL policy.

But first the context.

Pakistan has over 37 million young people, between the ages of 15 and 24, accounting for 20% of the total population. Do we have enough places in our tertiary education sector to absorb this constituency?

The global rate of unemployment among the youth is over 12 %. The unemployment rate for young people in the 15-24 year age-group in Pakistan is about 10 %. Education, especially tertiary education, is seen as a way out of this situation. What kind of tertiary education do we need to provide for livelihoods opportunities?

The rate of tertiary enrolment rates has increased in Pakistan in the decade between 2004-14 from less than 4 to over 10%.

The targets of the National Education Policy 2009, for 2015 have been met and the 15% participation by 2020 has become a reality that will not only be achieved but surpassed. The Policy also refers to quality and leveraging the use of ICT and distance education to expand access to higher education.

What kinds of technology? In the developed world, there are nearly 80 internet users per 100 persons, while in Pakistan, the number of internet users is about 14%. The real growth has been in mobile devices. How can distance learning institutions harness the potential of this affordable and available technology?

Let us turn to what we mean by open and distance learning.

The term open learning describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible.

The founding chancellor of the Open University of the UK, Lord Crowther defined the different dimensions of openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas. Open education is a philosophic construct that refers to policies and practices that allow entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender, or time constraints.

Many open universities do not insist on entry qualifications, allow learners to accumulate credits at their own pace and convenience and are flexible enough to allow learners to choose the courses they wish to study towards their qualification.

The distance education system, refers to the separation of the teacher and learner. Because learners and teachers are separated by time and space, some kind of technology or media must be used for communication between them.

In short, open learning is not the same as distance education but they are clearly complementary. Which is why we use the two terms together and the expression open and distance learning or ODL, would define the practice of AIOU as an open university.

Several new terms are now being used: elearning online learning and virtual learning to mean that the learner uses a variety of media, not just computers, to learn. These are different forms of distance learning. Another recent term, that reflects the growing trend of mixing ODL with conventional face-to-face teaching, is flexible or blended learning.

Elearning is gaining ground in Asia. For example over 90,000 students are online in the Open University of Malaysia and Mumbai University has 78,000 students who study online. There is an increasing convergence between distance learning and campus provision. Research shows that the blended approach works better in Asia.

Let us look at the ways in which ODL has grown and developed over the last five decades.

As governments and policy makers sought to expand access to education, reduce costs and improve standards, they realized that traditional brick and mortar solutions would not be enough. They began to invest in open universities

There has been a huge growth of open universities in the Commonwealth. In 1988, when COL began its operations, there were only 10 open universities in the Commonwealth—3 in Canada and one in Africa, that is UNISA.

Nearly three decades later, the number of open universities in the Commonwealth has tripled. You can see that only one remained in Canada, the other two having merged with campus universities to become dual-mode. On the other hand, the growth has been phenomenal in developing countries as governments struggle to increase access to higher education. Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia and Mauritius all established open universities during this time. The next wave of open universities will be in Africa.

The universities exemplify different models that cater to the needs of diverse learners in specific national contexts. But in terms of operations, all universities followed what Otto Peters described as the industrial model. There is advance planning to develop the curriculum and course content, which is then produced en masse and prepared for despatch. This resulted in a division of labour through which academics, media experts, printing experts, despatchers contributed to the overall operation.

Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) adapted the model to its own context. As a university it added two new dimensions—providing secondary education through its open school and introducing skills development as part of its extension activities. OUs are well known for the massification of higher education. AIOU enrolled 1.3 million in 2015—which demonstrates the increasing need for higher education and the confidence that people have in the open university system.

In fact if we look at the expected targets in ‘Pakistan Vision 2025 for higher education’, we find that if this rate of annual enrolment continues, these targets will be met well before we get to 2025. As we know, AIOU is a mega-university with enrolments of over 100,000.

A study by the National Knowledge Commission, India, shows that mega-universities, which achieve economies of scale cost substantially less than campus institutions. Pakistan’s AIOU costs 22%; China 40%; India’s IGNOU 35% and the OUUK, 50% as compared to campus universities.

What of quality? In 2012, the Open University of the UK ranked first in student satisfaction. In addition the UKOU ranked fifth among the 100 universities surveyed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK and was one rank higher than Oxford University.

In addition to dedicated single mode open universities, we also witnessed the rise of dual mode institutions. A UNESCO report on South Africa shows that enrolments in UNISA and Technikon SA, single mode universities, dropped by 21 % as people had other options for distance education. Deakin, a dual mode institution has one fourth of its students in the distance learning stream. 200,000 students are enrolled in the Campus of Open Learning, University of Delhi.

What are some of the advantages of dual-mode provision? The institution can reach larger numbers, and has access to academic talent. Classrooms can be used in the evenings and on weekends for tutorials for distance learning students. These institutions can provide access to a wider curriculum and generate more resources.

With the advantages, come the challenges. The distance learning unit is not autonomous and often under-funded. Staff do not have the training required to deal with distance learning and they often have inadequate learner support. Within the institution it is often considered second class.

India has both a network of open universities and dual mode institutions. Approximately 24% of all HE students study at a distance. A new policy on distance education is being developed and the Distance Education Bureau will become the Distance Education Council India.

There has been a phenomenal growth of OER in the last few years. While the US has played a leadership role globally, many developing countries are beginning to adopt open licence policies, with China, India and Nigeria contributing substantially to free and open content. Fiji has adopted a national OER policy this year.

As we know, OER are educational materials which are free and freely available. OER can be reused and repurposed to suit different needs and could be available in any medium, print, audio, video, digital. One key difference between OER and other educational resources is that OER have an open license, which allows adaptation and reuse without having to request the copyright holder.

Open universities have traditionally built their reputations on the quality of their content. By making quality content free, OER have pulled the rug of ‘quality courses’ from under the feet of open universities. ODL institutions will have to focus on learner support as their special contribution rather than their courseware. Open universities can develop OER policies and build the capacity of their staff to harness the potential of OER.

The rise of OER signals three shifts for ODL institutions. Traditionally open universities had an industrial model—the open universities of the future will be a more connected model. There were course development teams within open universities responsible for creating content. Now the teams will be dispersed around the globe and will adopt/adapt existing OER. The rise of OER will encourage the student to be a producer rather than the consumer of content.

Over the past five years, we have seen the phenomenal growth of Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs, a form of distance and online learning. In 2015, more people signed up for MOOCs than in the previous three years combined.

We are witnessing a steady growth of MOOCs in Asia. Peking University, offers Chinese MOOCs for students and members of the public. JMOOC, of which the Open University of Japan is an active member, targets home makers and senior citizens, and Malaysian MOOCs supported by the Ministry of Higher Education, are meant for students and members of the public.

MOOCs are an important solution to three key challenges in the current education system: one that it is rigid, two, it highly expensive and three, it takes a lot of time to complete. Top universities have taken the lead in offering MOOCs to a world deprived of quality education at a low cost. How will MOOCs impact Open Universities?

Here again we can see three key developments. Open universities have so far largely operated within national or regional jurisdictions. With the MOOC platform, the world becomes a connected classroom. Students had limited interactions with tutors in study centres. Today, there is a greater emphasis on peer to peer interactions and the use of social media. Open universities will increasingly make use of emerging technologies to support their learners.

Let us now look at how QA has developed in ODL institutions across the Commonwealth.

Research has shown that there is no significant difference between campus and ODL. Yet ODL continues to be regarded as second-rate in many developing countries. For this reason, many ODL institutions have made extra efforts to demonstrate quality to their different stakeholders. Let us look at some examples.

The Open University of Malaysia, has got an ISO 9001: 2000 certification and is also accredited by the Malaysian National Accreditation Board.

The model in this case reflects an attempt at constantly trying to improve its processes through internal and external quality assurance measures, in relation to national as well as international standards

Institutions such as IGNOU comply with standards set by the national bodies namely the Distance Education Council of India.

Some institutions have developed their own QA policies such as the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). The Open University of Sri Lanka was assessed successfully by the University Grants Commission based on the same criteria as in the case of the 14 conventional universities in the country. However, the Senate of OUSL believed that this did not take into consideration the specific features that characterize ODL. To fill this gap, OUSL developed a QA framework for ODL.

Here is an example of an open university taking the lead in developing standards and quality measures that would be applicable at the national level and cover the over 25 providers of distance education in the country.

In the past decade the emphasis has shifted to the integration of both external and internal QA measures so that institutions are encouraged to develop 'cultures of quality'.

According to Sir John Daniel, there are three pillars of distance education: good quality study materials; effective tutorial support; efficient management. Any quality must be measured along these dimensions

In Pakistan, the Quality Assurance Agency is a policy making and monitoring body for the maintenance of quality of higher education in Pakistan. A National Qualifications Framework has been approved and it focuses on learning outcomes. If we can demonstrate that the learning outcomes are achieved, it no longer matters whether a learner studied on campus or at a distance.

What implications do these developments have for policy development in Pakistan? Let me begin by raising some questions and make three suggestions.

The international community has identified 17 sustainable development goals with Goal 4 focusing on education. The objective of this Goal is to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all' by 2030. Open and distance learning will have a key role to play.

In November last year, the Framework for Action for achieving Goal 4 by 2030 was adopted at UNESCO, Paris. One of the actions recommended is the development of policies and programmes for quality distance learning through the use of technologies to provide access to quality learning. It also refers to the use of online learning, the internet and MOOCs.

What are some of the questions we need to ask ourselves as we prepare to develop a national policy? How useful is ODL to expand access to quality HE and lifelong learning in Pakistan? What is the available ICT infrastructure? How do you plan to reach the unreached sections of society? Do you need the same or different QA regulations for open distance learning as compared to campus provision? How will ODL be aligned to the NQF for credit mobility and recognition between and among institutions?

It would be useful to have a clear policy on the use of Open and Distance Learning. This could be either integrated into an existing education policy, or there could be a separate ODL policy. Or this could form part of an ICT in Education policy. It should be flexible enough to embrace emerging provisions such as MOOCs. Political will is essential to the successful implementation of the policy as that will ensure adequate resources.

If you are a campus institution and wish to develop an institutional policy for offering distance education, you would need to review the mission and mandate of your institution. What are the reasons for going dual-mode and what you will do to achieve your goals? How will the faculty contribute—would they require training or additional incentives? How will you provide support to the distance learners? How will you ensure that the quality and standards are maintained for both campus and distance students? What systems do you need to put in place to cater to the large numbers and deal with the logistics of preparing and distributing study materials?

The second step would be to develop rigorous QA Guidelines for ODL and align it with the National Qualifications Framework.

We believe that open universities and campus providers have the same purpose that all universities serve. And if all institutions are judged according to the same benchmarks, there is less likelihood of Open and Distance Learning being considered second rate. The Open University, UK is assessed like any other university by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). It is true that many open universities have a social mission and a more flexible delivery mode. But if the judgements are based on fitness for purpose, quality of courses, effective learner support, and student achievement, there is no need for separate QA regulations only for ODL provision.

The third step would be to train staff in the different aspects of effective distance learning delivery. Capacity building in curriculum, effective learner support, assessment techniques and the adoption and adaptation of OER would be some areas of focus. All three steps, developing a policy, establishing robust

QA and capacity building, can be taken up simultaneously since they involve three different entities. COL will be happy to accompany you on this journey.

Thank you for your kind attention.