

# Message at Round Table Conference of State Open Universities



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It's a pleasure to be virtually present at this high level round table of vice chancellors and I thank Prof Salunke for the invitation. I must commend YCMOU for taking the lead and I hope other VCs will take this up on an annual basis so that this becomes a regular forum for discussion and collaboration.

COL has had a long association with the YCMOU and the university received the COL Award of Excellence in Institutional Achievement in Distance Education in 2002. COL also values its partnership with IGNOU and the State Open Universities and we hope to strengthen these links going forward.

Today I would like to talk about two major developments—one, the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals by the global community and two, the phenomenal developments in ICTs—and the implications of these for open universities. How can open universities be at the forefront of responding effectively to these developments?

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals were adopted last year. Goal 4 is a standalone goal on education that aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. The Millennium Development Goals 2000-2015 focused on providing universal primary education for all. This time, the emphasis is on secondary and tertiary education, on quality education and improved learning outcomes as well as on social inclusion. UNESCO has led the development of a Framework for Action for achieving this Goal and one of the recommendations is to 'develop policies and programmes for the provision of quality distance learning in tertiary education, with appropriate financing and use of technology, including the Internet, massive open online courses and other modalities that meet accepted quality standards to improve access'. This means that there will be a greater emphasis than ever before on distance and technology enabled learning as governments try and provide access to quality higher education to their citizens.

India is a young country with a median age of 27 years. India is also a country with a huge population. How can we convert this into a demographic dividend? As we know, there is a high rate of unemployment especially among the youth. 10% of our young people are unemployed. The GER for tertiary education among the 18-23 year olds is about 20 %, well below the average of 40-50% in the developed world. What will the role of open universities in increasing access to quality higher education? How can young people be skilled for employment and entrepreneurship through open and distance learning? Our prime minister Mr Modi has called for skills to be developed at speed and at scale. There are several examples of best practice at the YCMOU, KKHSOU, to name two SOUs. Orissa Open

University has a special clause in its Act to promote skills development. How can we share our resources and expertise to harness the potential of ODL to skill the nation?

The second major development has been in the area of technology. When I first joined IGNOU, VCRs, audio and video cassettes were considered an innovation. Today everything is digital and our smartphones are more powerful than the computers of those days. 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. The MOOC has one distinction: it is the only scalable educational technology that was developed by and for educators. Nearly all other educational technologies such as radio and TV were adaptations of technology developments from other sectors. But can we reach the unreached using MOOCs platforms?

While there are 80 internet users per hundred in the developed world, the figure in India drops to 18%. The real growth has taken place in mobile devices and there are 75 mobile phone users to every 100 persons in our country. This calls for innovations in the use of MOOCs. COL's MOOC for Malis or gardeners was offered jointly with the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. Participants learned through basic mobile phones, call centres and peer to peer interactions.

MOOCs are a form, of distance learning and the open universities in India can take a leadership role in harnessing their potential. What are the implications of MOOCs for open universities? Open universities have so far largely operated within national or regional jurisdictions. With the MOOC platform, the world has become a connected classroom. Students had limited interactions with their tutors in study centres. There is now a greater emphasis on peer to peer interactions and use of social media. MOOCs promote greater learner autonomy, and more structured course content. As ODL practitioners, we have always catered to the autonomous learner and provided well designed content. But MOOCs, through the use of new technologies, have taken this to the next level. The modules have become smaller and more granular, there is a greater emphasis on short videos and more dialogue and interaction, mostly among peers.

We can learn from the MOOC experience to strengthen learner support. Research shows that the more engaged the learner, the greater the likelihood of their success and fewer chances of dropping out. Regular feedback is another important feature of ensuring the success of our learners. MOOC platforms can be a valuable channel for us to enhance learning outcomes.

But to implement innovations, we need the staff to take ownership. This would require a greater focus on staff development. I remember when I joined IGNOU, I underwent an induction programme with other new recruits for a full three weeks. And there was continuous capacity building in various aspects of ODL. The IGNOU leadership ensured that we were not only up to date in recent developments but were also excited about our work and the opportunity we had to make a difference to the lives of thousands of learners. The VCs led large delegations to international conferences to build the IGNOU brand, forge networks and provide exposure to the staff. Have we lost our way over the years? As VCs, you can not only motivate your staff to give their best but also ensure that constant training and retraining becomes an integral feature of your institution.

Today we live in an age of endless possibilities. All nations are considering how to achieve quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. Open universities must seize this opportunity and align themselves to this agenda and be active contributors to national development. Open universities have the expertise and experience in technology, pedagogy and social inclusion. Campus institutions have much to learn from us. The time has come to go beyond seeking parity of esteem and to create new models to skill our nation with speed and at scale.

Thank you for your kind attention.