Looking Ahead for COL: Reimagining the Future of Learning

**Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)
Co-written with Dr Venkataraman Balaji, COL**

My topic today is 'Looking Ahead for COL; Reimagining the Future of Learning', which I have prepared with my colleague Dr V Balaji.

Of the 52 Member States in the Commonwealth, 46 are developing countries. There any discussion of technology must address the concerns of the last person in the queue.

What does COL do? Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to quality education and training.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to three things: economic growth; social inclusion and environmental conservation. Let me share one example each of how COL achieves these objectives.

First, how has COL supported economic growth? COL's Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme is offered in 11 countries. Raymond Loh, an alumnus of Wawasan Open University, Malaysia completed this programme in his early fifties and started a moving and relocation service which now has a presence in 40 countries. This is an open and distance learning programme which uses a range of technologies including print.

Two, how does COL's work support social inclusion? Even today we find a wide prevalence of early child and forced marriage across the Commonwealth. Thanks to grants from Australia and Canada, COL is training 45,000 girls and women over three years in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania. This is done by using blended approaches—both technologies and face to face contact.

Third, what is COL's contribution to environmental conservation? Working with the University of Seychelles, COL has developed a course on the blue economy and this is presently being offered as a free MOOC. This is entirely an online programme.

COL is an acknowledged world leader in open educational resources and organized six regional consultations on OER in collaboration with UNESCO, the government of Slovenia and Hewlett Foundation. 102 governments have responded and the results of this survey will feed into the 2nd World OER Congress in Slovenia to be held in September.

As COL's work demonstrates, technologies can be harnessed to increase access to quality learning that is affordable. More governments want to skill their citizens for livelihoods with speed and scale.

The future of jobs is changing faster than we can imagine.

Technology will have a great impact and as an Oxford University study found, 47% of today's jobs could be automated in the next 20 years.

Automation will have a bigger impact in developing countries which provide labour.

According to a World Economic Forum report. Creativity, Problem Solving and Critical thinking will be the top three skills required to succeed. Are we preparing learners for these skills?

Simply reforming current education systems will not be enough. Countries will need to continually skill and reskill their workforce throughout their life.

In short we need to prepare an ecosystem that promotes lifelong learning for all.

In the 70s, the focus was on Lifelong Education and in 1996 the Delors Report of UNESCO made the transition to Lifelong Learning.

The European Commission (2001:33) defines Lifelong Learning as 'all learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence'.

As an educational concept, the operationalization of Lifelong Learning involves the integration of three approaches: pedagogy, andragogy and heutagogy. In pedagogy, the learner depends on the teacher for what and how to learn. Under andragogy, the adult learners are more independent, learn when they need to and use their own experiences. But what is learned is still determined by the teacher. We can see that the heutagogic approach applies to the independent learner, who determines what and how to learn and the learning is not planned and can take place anywhere. Blaschke (2012: 60) points out that the heutagogical approach can be viewed as a progression from pedagogy to andragogy to heutagogy, with learners likewise progressing in maturity and autonomy.

Blaschke (2012) suggests that the heutagogical approach could be integrated into formal learning programmes through flexible curriculum, learner-directed questions, flexible and negotiated assessments, collaborative learning etc. The learners are not seen as passive recipients but as active participants who find innovative approaches to solving problems.

How can technology be used to achieve this?

There are three developments that are likely to make a serious impact on learning at all levels. Distance Education is now a component of the convergence of online and flexible learning. The sudden rise of Messaging is another development. Increasing interest in and deployment of Blockchain, a super data base technology has particular implications for quality and credibility as learner records can now be maintained with integrity across institutions and agencies.

The MOOC is an exemplar of the convergence of online and flexible learning. An important factor is the cost of access to a MOOC management platform. The more widely used or popular platforms are either too expensive or not accessible to institutions in developing countries. This is why COL has facilitated the development of a low-cost, entry-level MOOC management platform, which costs about one tenth of a well-known MOOC platform. It is designed for faculty that have no experience with online learning. We have offered 15 MOOCs on this platform with partners in Fiji, India, Nigeria and Malta using this platform called MooKIT.

We have recently released MooKIT "offline". Learners access the videos offline while they go online to participate in discussions with peers and mentors, substantially reducing bandwidth costs. Such platforms can be deployed for formal informal and non-formal learning.

As of June this year, we have already created a pilot version offline with six MOOCs. During 2018, we will make available about 100 MOOCs offline as OER for instant access on smartphones.

Another important trend that has strong implications for learning is the rapid rise of Messaging. WhatsApp and Messenger have billions of users. Global traffic due to messaging is larger today than in social media networks. This is largely because of the increase in the number of smartphones users everywhere including developing countries. The graph here shows that by the middle of last year, Apps that worked only with Messaging platforms had more users than Apps that worked with social media.

Chatbots are a rapidly emerging technology that will be relevant in learning. This graph shows that a typical user tends to spend more time with Chat or Messaging Apps than with Web Apps. The difference is as high as 450%. As you know a professor at Georgia Tech deployed Jill Watson, a Chatbot as a Teaching Assistant in an online course quite successfully.

Because Messaging is much more widely used, Messaging-based learning management platforms will have a faster uptake in the developing world, thereby reducing costs. The highly popular WeChat ecosystem in China can also include a learning platform. COL is working with a partner to build a Messaging-based online course management platform.

A key dimension in online learning is Quality. Block chain, a major development in the area of financial technology, can potentially address this concern. A block chain is, in effect, an open source online register that is maintained cooperatively. A learner can have a distinct, persistent ID in this space. An agency that imparts learning could track progress and add scores and sign off making the entire set of records a block. Another agency where the same learner takes up learning can create a similar block. It is important to note that the records cannot be modified at all. Many such blocks can be "chained" together. A prospective employer could verify directly the veracity of claims about learning achievements.

This diagram created at the Knowledge Media Institute of the Open University, UK shows how different stakeholders including the students participate in maintaining the Block chain. One can see accreditors, validators as well as teachers and potential employers participate in the Blockchain. The student acquires the profile, institutions add credit and status information, accreditors determine qualifications, while the employer can verify the credentials.

We can now see how Blockchain certificates are already made available using an example from MIT which is pioneering blockchains in learning using Open Standards. As you can see in this visual, the certificate is in a human-readable form with logos and signatures.

The arrow points to a link which can help a potential employer to verify the certificate online.

This is similar to the set of processes that are used in the world of online finance to track transactions at every stage from one account to another.

The Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning, a regional initiative of COL in Europe, works with senior experts to develop Block Certificates for learning. These will be introduced in Malta and a conference is being organised early next year.

What is the way forward?

We can envision a triple helix where convergence, messaging and Blockchain can be viewed as the three strands that intertwine with each other at various points to support Future Learning. Convergence of online and flexible learning requires us to conceptualise viable hybrids of online and offline paradigms especially for developing countries. Messaging can provide the virtual space for a new generation learning management system. These will integrate with Chatbots-and with social media. Quality continues to remain a concern. One technology that can contribute greatly is the Blockchain that enables independent audit and verification of learning achievements across institutions and over time. The future of learning cannot be imagined without paying adequate attention to reaching the unreached.

As we have seen, new technologies will enable us to increase access to education and lifelong learning, reduce costs and ensure the quality and integrity of learning achievements. But is it enough to provide education and skills alone? As a young Ethiopian woman said 'if someone can give me the skills and the opportunity to work, I know I can achieve my goals'

People need not just the skills but also the opportunities that their societies provide. Governments have a major role in developing not just sound educational policies but also enabling policies in trade, industry and agriculture (Stiglitz & Greenwald, 2015).

How can institutions, address the challenge of lifelong learning and livelihoods? One, by transforming the curriculum and pedagogy. Two, by harnessing appropriate and emerging technologies. Three, by facilitating the convergence between education, the labour market and the learner.

With that, let me thank you for your kind attention.