Expanding Access, Openness and Flexibility

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Distinguished Colleagues, Friends

The Commonwealth of Learning is an intergovernmental organisation hosted by Canada. Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to harness the potential of technologies for expanding access to education and training. COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. We are working towards various solutions to promote learning that leads to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. We focus on people at the bottom of the pyramid in the developing countries of the Commonwealth. How can we rethink teaching and learning in a digital age so that no one is left behind? In which ways can increased access, openness and flexibility help us achieve this objective?

First, lets take up the issue of access: access for whom?

Since 2000, global enrolments in tertiary education have doubled from 100 million to over 200 million (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). While there has been a huge expansion in the last two decades, the GER in tertiary education is still far from achieved. According to a recent report (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2016), in Sub-Saharan Africa only 8% of the relevant age group have access to tertiary education. South Asia is marginally better with 23% but compare this to the 70% GER in OECD countries.

As you know, SDG 4 aspires to promote equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030 (UNESCO, 2017). Many developing countries are establishing open universities as one possible solution. Recently COL conducted a survey of 27 open universities in the Commonwealth (Mishra, 2017) and found that collectively, these 27 institutions alone catered to 4.4 million learners. In ten of these open universities, the number of female enrolments exceeded those of males.   There is evidence that the participation of women is increasing not only in OECD countries but also in the developing countries in Sub Saharan Africa and South East Asia. For instance, only 2 per cent of Ethiopia's poorest male 19-year-olds are in higher education, while 9 per cent of its poorest females of the same age are in the system. In 2013, in the Philippines, 52% of the richest 25-29 year old completed 4 years of tertiary education while only 1% from the poorest families did. Affordability is therefore a key barrier to access in tertiary education. And according to a study by Sonia Ilie and Pauline Rose, from Cambridge University (Ilie & Rose, 2017), 'educational inequalities concerning poverty are far greater than those regarding gender' (Grove, 2017).

Equity and inclusion are major concerns for the global community. About 15% of the world population suffers from one form of disability or another (World Health Organization, 2016). People with disabilities are often disadvantaged in terms of access to tertiary education. For example, in South Africa 80% of disabled people aged 20-24 are not in tertiary education (Van der Merwe, 2017). UNISA has established an Advocacy and Resource Centre for Students with Disabilities. The Open University of Tanzania is helping people with vision disabilities to access ICTs for learning. These examples are an exception rather than the rule.

We need innovations to increase access for resource-poor communities, women and people with disabilities. This conference is a platform for all of us to come up with ideas and concrete solutions.

Which brings me to the second question, can openness enhance access especially for those who cannot afford tertiary education? Let us take just one dimension of openness, open educational resources (OER). Even in the US, 14% of students report that they drop a course because of the high costs of textbooks (The University of Oklahoma Libraries, 2017). COL recently conducted a study of governments on the use of OER and 81% of the respondents believed that one of the key benefits of using OER was to lower the costs of education (Commonwealth of Learning, 2017). COL supported the University of Swaziland to develop a nursing programme using OER, leading to a substantial reduction in costs and increasing the number of trained nurses at affordable costs.

While OER have tremendous potential for expanding access, many institutions are reluctant to embrace this development. Is it because institutions do not have the autonomy or the flexibility to respond to emerging developments? An OECD report shows that out of the 14 countries studied, only eight countries enjoyed full autonomy in setting academic structures and course content (OECD, 2003). Similarly, a UK study shows that participatory rather than autocratic governance helps to improve the quality of higher education (Martinez & Maynard, 2002). Most developing countries have centralised systems of education that do not allow openness. How can we expect openness to thrive in closed educational systems?

This brings us to the third question of flexibility.

Way back in 1983, Desmond Keegan said that 'many of the distance teaching universities…have closed and rigid structures, are inflexible and slow to respond to community education needs.' Are we more flexible today? Can we harness the power of ICTs to help resource-poor people, women and those with disabilities to access learning at their own pace, place and convenience? Even in a highly developed country like the US, one quarter of Americans are without broadband and would be counted as have-nots (Vick, 2017). In South Africa, only 9.6 of the population have home internet access (IOA, 2017). Therefore, mobile technology is often seen as the way forward.

But is mobile broadband affordable? Can we use it for learning? According to a recent report (Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), 2017), in Sierra Leone and Malawi it will cost about 50% of a family's monthly income to access 1 GB mobile broadband. In addition, there is a gender gap in mobile phone use and 'women in South Asia are 38% less likely to own a phone than men' (GSMA, 2017). Even when women have phones, they are less likely to use data services beyond voice". The gender digital divide is alive and well.

Given such conditions can online learning reach the unreached? Can online learning be made relatively resource neutral? COL has developed a low-cost offline server called Aptus. Aptus does not require power from the mains. We use solar chargers instead. It does not require any connectivity. We use a wireless router. All this enables teachers and students to access good quality digital materials without paying huge sums for broadband access. Aptus was deployed in a school in the remote mountainous

region of Swat, Pakistan and students were provided tablets. Both the students and the teachers benefited—the academic performance of the students improved and the teachers' attitudes towards their teaching practice changed (Ally, Nasir, Abdulbaki, & Cheng, 2016). What appropriate technology options can we provide for the last person in the queue?

What have we learned? One, equity and inclusion will not happen by themselves -we need a proactive and targeted approach. Two, to harness the potential of openness, institutions will need to embrace open policies and open practices. Finally, technology by itself does not expand access and we can reach the unreached only when technology is placed in an appropriate social, economic and political context and the learner is empowered to use the technology effectively.

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