

# Can Open Learning Transform Society?



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Professor Asha Kanwar

President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Co-written with Dr K Balasabramanian, Vice President, COL and Dr Sanjaya Mishra, COL

Distinguished Colleagues, Friends. Let me begin by thanking Vice Chancellor Prof Hitesh Deka and his team for the kind invitation to participate in this international conference on ‘Developmental Interventions and Open Learning for Empowering and Transforming Society’. This is a very relevant topic as India stands poised to go up to the next level of development. I would also like to thank Prof Nripendra Narayan Sarma for the excellent arrangements. My presentation, which I have prepared with my two colleagues Dr Bala and Dr Sanjaya Mishra, will explore the question ‘Can Open Learning Transform Society?’

KKHSOU is one of the younger public open universities in India and the first to serve the North-Eastern region. Yet even in its short existence, KKHSOU is bringing education to thousands of men and women who are very diverse in terms of age and social background. I’m sure Prof KK Handiqui, the great scholar, educator and visionary, in whose name this university was established, is with us in spirit today, and pleased that if the student cannot reach the institution, the institution is reaching the student in remote rural locations and helping them to transform their communities.

KKHSOU’s commitment to quality education is evident in the fact that the university came forward to implement the COL Review and Implementation Model during 2012-15 which was verified by an external evaluation and they were awarded this Certificate of Recognition.

KKHSOU has also undertaken several innovative steps to empower and transform society. They offer free education to inmates in 13 district jails in the state. The Board of Management has adopted a Policy for Persons with Disabilities which will provide free education and make various accommodations to their provisions to provide effective services to people with disabilities. The University offers subsidised education to those living below the poverty line.

All this makes me particularly proud of the achievements of my institution where I received a DLitt (honoris causa) in 2014.

Let me also say a word about my organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning or COL. COL is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver in 1987. Canada came forward to host the organisation and our headquarters are in British Columbia.

What do we do? Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to use open and distance learning and technologies for expanding access to quality education and training.

Under a bilateral agreement with the Government of India, we have a regional office—the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, or CEMCA in Delhi with the mandate to serve seven Commonwealth countries.

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 we do this. 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.

Two, how does COL work to support social inclusion? These women in India are part of COL's L3F project, under which they have learnt agriculture and enterprise development skills using basic mobile phones. They have established companies in agriculture and livestock in which they are shareholders and have generated enough assets within a space of three years to pay back their loans and support themselves and their families.

Third, what is COL's contribution to environmental conservation? Environmental sustainability is a central concern for all of us. A recent study conducted in Botswana showed that the carbon footprint of a distance learning student was only one tenth of that of a campus-based student, without a negative impact on learning outcomes.

COL is trying to harness the potential of ODL to promote learning that leads to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. This aligns us with Goal 4 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that the global community adopted in 2015. SDG 4 aspires to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. How can we achieve this ambitious target?

Let us look at the context of our Commonwealth and more particularly India and the challenges and opportunities we face.

As you know the Commonwealth has 52 Member States that span all regions of the planet—from the Caribbean and North America to Europe and Africa, Asia and the Pacific.

The Commonwealth has a population of 2.4 billion and 60% of the people are under the age of 30 (Commonwealth Secretariat, n.d.). In fact, one third of the entire world's youth live in Commonwealth countries.

India is a young country where the number of young people of 15-34 years has increased in the last thirty years. The median age of the Indian population is about 27 years (MSPI, 2017).

If you look at the unemployment figures of the youth, you'll find it is as high as 10% (World Bank, n.d.). How can we provide learning that leads to more livelihoods opportunities for our large population of young people?

Can ICT provide the answer? In India, there are 46 internet users per hundred while there are 87% mobile phone subscribers (ITU, 2017). What is the opportunity here for us?

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in tertiary education has increased to 27% but is far short of the rich-country average of 40-70% (UIS, n.d.). The World Bank tells us that for a country to achieve sustainable development, tertiary enrolments should be in the region of 40-50% (World Bank, 2000).

In Assam, the GER in tertiary education drops to about 13%, which is only half of the national average. This is similar to the 13.7 % average of the GER at the national level for STs. The SC total of 19% GER is again below national enrolments in tertiary education (MHRD, 2016b).

If we compare India with other Asian countries like Philippines and Thailand, we find that there is a wider disparity in educational attainment among the poorest and the richest 18 year olds in India rather than their peers in Thailand (WEF, 2015). Social disparities seem to be higher in India than among other Asian counterparts.

If we compare India's performance in higher education and training with other emerging economies in Asia, we find a parity but if we fall far short of developed countries like South Korea and Singapore. Only 2.3% of India's workforce has undergone formal skill training (NITI Ayog, 2017). Compare this with 80% in Japan and 96 % in South Korea. As our PM says, we need to train our population in skills at speed and scale. What role can open universities play in achieving this objective?

The Govt of India, while focusing on world class universities has also increased its emphasis on vocational and professional education and set a target of training five million apprentices by 2020 (NITI Ayog, 2017).

As Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz and Bruce Greenwald say, 'what truly separates developed from less developed countries is not just a gap in resources or output but a gap in knowledge' (Stiglitz, & Greenwald, 2014).

What is the role of education in helping us to transform society? A World Bank study shows that one additional year of schooling for women can result in a 20% increase in their income. Even a 0.1% improvement in a country's education equality can result in an over 23% increase in per capita income (Psacharopoulos, & Patrinos, 2002). In Ethiopia, six years of education can result in a better contribution to soil conservation and more environment-friendly agricultural practices (UNESCO, 2013). There is a clear link then between education, economic growth, equity, environmental conservation, sustainable development.

How can open learning lead to the overall development of our societies?

What is open learning? When we speak of open learning, we usually refer to correspondence courses, open and distance learning or to open universities. Opening up education also means the democratisation of education for those hitherto kept outside its purview. And because women have traditionally been denied the opportunities for education, opening up education also means reaching the unreached.

When COL first started operations in 1988, there were ten open universities in the Commonwealth. Three in Canada alone with just one in Africa, UNISA, the oldest open university in the world since it started its distance learning operations in 1946.

Today there are 30 open universities in the Commonwealth. The trend is clear—in developed countries such as Canada, two dedicated open universities merged with campus institutions so only one dedicated distance learning institution, Athabasca, remains. The growth has been phenomenal in developing countries. Recently COL conducted a survey of 27 open universities in the Commonwealth and found that collectively, these institutions catered to 4.4 million learners (COL, 2017). In ten of these open universities, the number of female enrolments exceeded those of males.

India has seen a huge growth with 15 public open universities and two private institutions here in the North East. The enrolment in these institutions is over 2.1 million as per a recent survey (Srivastava, 2016) and constitute 11% of all HE enrolments in the country (MHRD, 2016a).

Openness is an evolving concept and the three aspects of openness are interrelated and can be described as access, content and technology. Open universities have already increased access, as we have seen.

Open Educational Resources or OER are a fairly new dimension of openness. Open universities have always been proud of their quality content and this often generated an additional revenue stream for the institution. Now there are millions of pages of open content available on the web. How can we benefit from world class quality content? Often up to 80 % of faculty time is spent on course development. The use of OER can free some of this time for more student support and lower the costs of programme/course fees. Some open universities in the Commonwealth are developing OER policies and building the capacity of their staff to harness the potential of OER.

The rise of OER signals three shifts for ODL institutions. Traditionally open universities have an industrial model—the open universities of the future will be a more connected model. There are course development teams within the university 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 simply the consumer of content.

The third pillar of openness is technology—one manifestation of which is the MOOC platform which allows us to offer free online courses to thousands of students around the world. MOOCs are an important solution to three key challenges in the current education system: one that it is rigid, two, it is 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. Open Universities are well placed to engage with both OER and MOOCs. Their experience in content design and development can easily lead to effective adoption and adaptation of OER and MOOCs.

With all this expertise in pedagogy and technologies, what has been the role of ODL institutions in OER and MOOCs? We will have to admit that these initiatives were taken by research universities rather than ODL institutions. OER have been available for nearly two decades now and MOOCs will soon be ten years old, but how open and responsive have we been to embracing these developments?

Open learning has provided educational opportunities to hundreds of thousands of those who would otherwise not have had the chance. In which ways can open learning address the challenges of development?

When the Open University UK was established in 1969, the notion of ‘openness’ was a significant innovation. Lord Crowther, the founding chancellor of the Open University defined openness in relation to people, to places, to methods and to ideas. This formed the basis of throwing open the ivory towers of higher education (Perry, 1976). Let us reflect on how open we have been along these four dimensions.

Are we open to all people? A PhD thesis examining the socio-economic status of distance learners noted that most graduate and post graduate students in UP belonged to middle class families (Suja, 2014). What happens to the last person in the queue?

15% of the world's population suffers from some form of disability (World Bank, 2011) —in India 3% of the seats in HE are reserved for disabled candidates but only 0.56 % are able to benefit. As per a recent survey only 0.21% disabled students are in higher education in India (MHRD, 2016a).

If you look at the enrolment of women in Indian open universities, you find that we are almost achieving parity in enrolments. The perception has largely been that “ODL was a type of education particularly suited to women” because “women have many more restrictions on their time and mobility than men, as well as on their access to disposable income” (Kirkup, 1995, p.10), and ODL has been portrayed as a gender-neutral tool that enables women to obtain education amidst these social, economic and cultural constraints (Margolis, & Fisher, 2002).

But despite the increased number of women, does parity lead to increased equity? Some studies have shown that ODL can reinforce stereotypical gender roles, much like the traditional education system. COL had commissioned a study to look at the impact of ODL on gender in Kerala and Rajasthan. It found that ODL students in four Master' level programmes subscribed to stereotypical views on gender based learning tasks. Even in Kerala where gender parity was perceived to be high, these stereotypical views still prevailed (Sen, 2010). Quoting Herring (1999), Crymble (2016) points out that in online distance learning environment “women were expected to provide ‘minimal participation, in keeping with the traditional expectation that public debate is predominantly a male preserve’” (2016, p.50).

How are we doing in relation to reaching remote and unreached places? According to 2011 Census data 68.84 % of India's population lives in rural areas. Of the enrolments in open universities, 52% come from rural areas (Srivastava, 2016). Are we investing 50% of our infrastructure in rural areas to better serve this constituency?

If we compare the internet subscriptions per 100 people we find that 62 % of the urban population has access to the internet as compared with 14 % in rural areas. By 2020, 50% of India's internet users will be located in rural areas and 40% will be women (BCG, 2017). Are we preparing for these developments?

What about our methods? Way back in 1986, 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’ (p.28). 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?

If we look at the student to teacher ratio in our open universities, it varies vastly from 1 to 12 in one case to 1 to nearly 9000 in another. What should be the benchmark or modalities for ensuring that we are able to give attention to each student?

The output rate of our open universities during 2016 shows a great variation in results—from 2% to 39% (COL, 2017).

How can we decrease the high dropout rates? Pierrakeas (2004) suggests that 80% dropout can happen due to non-completion of assignments. According to Holmberg (1995), two-way communication and feedback strengthen learning. Research shows that instant feedback and keeping the learners engaged can contribute to keeping motivation levels high.

How open are we to ideas? How much emphasis do we give to community development and outreach? Or to lifelong learning? Do our programmes have the academic content and the skills required for livelihoods?

Are we opening or closing our doors to research and professional programmes? What can we learn from the success of others?

Open universities have been so busy developing courses that they have paid inadequate attention to research and innovation. If you look at the Scimago rankings for 2017, you find that only four open universities feature among the over 5000 ranked institutions—these are the open universities of UK, Israel, Netherlands and Greece. When will we see Indian institutions in such tables?

We know that ODL has reached people in unreached places with methods and innovative ideas that have made educational success possible. But what has been the impact of ODL on development? There are very few studies in this area. Alan Tait (2014) examined the mission statements of 12 major open universities and found that the focus was on access, equity, equality, democratization, social justice, transforming society and development. However, he found that “nowhere is there proposed a theoretical and substantive understanding of what development is, or how it works, nor ... what should be done in terms of curriculum and pedagogy to support such aims” (p.8)

Can ODL contribute to development and transform societies? How can we extend our reach to cover more people and places by adopting effective methods and ideas?

At COL, we have found that if we want to reach the unreached people, we must adopt a targeted approach. Mayuri dropped out of school in class 9 and learned how to make decorative macramé using a blended approach with our partner Mann Deshi. She opened a bank account, has saved Rs 2000 and earns enough to support her family.

If the children cannot come to schools, the school goes to the children. COL works with this boat school which picks up children from their villages in a flood-prone region of Bangladesh. These boat schools are also fitted with computers and solar generators to service students from the most resource-poor and remote region. In our planning, could we start with remote regions rather than urban centres? How can we redistribute infrastructure and resources for better learner support in far-flung places?

COL tries to use innovative methods to reach newer constituencies. These are pygmy communities in the remote forests of Uganda and they learn bee-keeping in their own language using their basic mobile phones. Makerere University is providing support under its outreach function.

Let us be open to new ideas. As Victor Hugo said ‘you can’t resist an idea whose time has come’. Open universities instead of resisting the idea of OER, must be ready to embrace open content. The learner must be at the centre of everything we do—instead of making them passive consumers of knowledge, let us encourage them to become active producers of OER.

What then can we do as open universities and ODL providers? First, embrace lifelong learning and strengthen our outreach function to open up education to wider constituencies especially the unreached. Lifelong learning includes the whole spectrum of formal non-formal and informal learning.

The second step would be to inspire and mobilise our staff to contribute to development. Let us 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 and MOOCs would be some areas of focus.

The third strategy is that in order to scale skills development, it is important to develop need based courses, which open up opportunities for livelihoods. This can be done in partnership with industry and the service sector. Industry partnership is essential to create curricula that are appropriate and relevant to make learners employable.

Is our system producing global citizens who make our society safe for women, contribute to national development and ensure that we do not make our cities as polluted as Delhi? Let us understand the

magnitude of the challenges that we face today. And take an ecosystem approach to solve them at scale. When done right, the kind of open learning we offer will result in social inclusion, economic growth and environmental conservation—all elements of sustainable development. But to transform society, ODL must transform itself first.

With that let me thank you for your attention.

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