

Why Open Learning is of Increasing Importance and Not just for Distance Providers



5 September 2018

Open Learning Conference
Pretoria, South Africa

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Greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning. It's an honour to be virtually present at this joint conference of two important distance education associations DEASA and NADEOSA, which have made significant contributions to the growth and development of open learning in Africa. I am very grateful to our former Board Member and COL Fellow, Jenny Glennie and the organisers for the kind invitation.

Today I'll address the topic that you have suggested: Why Open Learning is of increasing importance and not just for distance providers. I will first reflect on what we mean by open learning today. I will then look at three pillars of openness that are relevant for both distance and campus institutions and finally explore the possible ways forward.

First, what do we mean by open education? Right from the early days of correspondence courses and external degrees, the thrust has been to throw open the ivory towers of higher education. Policy makers from developing countries saw open and distance learning as an opportunity for democratising education and reaching the unreached. Though we date the origins of Open Learning to the 60s, the foundations can be traced right back to philosophers such as Confucius who proposed the principle of "providing education for all people without discrimination".

As an ODL community, we have always understood that open education 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 openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas. This is the philosophical basis of open education. But how open are we in our practices?

Globally, the concept of open education has wider connotations. According to Tony Bates, open education refers to Education for All, which meant providing universal primary education, Open Educational Resources, open access research, open textbooks and open data. When we use the phrase open learning today, we are extending the definition to include not just formal education but non-formal and informal learning at all levels. In short, the term open learning covers the entire spectrum of lifelong learning, an essential requirement for the creation of a learning society. As 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'.

According to a recent UNDP report (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2016), in Sub-Saharan Africa only 8% of the relevant age group have access to tertiary education as compared to the

70% GER in OECD countries. As per a recent COL survey of 27 open universities in the Commonwealth, it was found that in 2016, the collective enrolment in these institutions was 4.4 million. While this is a significant number, it does not help us advance the GER. This can only happen if all institutions, both campus and distance, adopt open learning. Let us consider the three aspects of openness which are interrelated: access, content and technology. All three are common to both distance and campus provision.

First, the issue of access. Today even campus universities like MIT have opened their doors to anyone anywhere in the world through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and micro-credentials. Anyone who successfully completes a set of MOOCs under the MicroMasters scheme can receive credits and exemption for one semester of study at MIT. 33% of students in the US take at least one online course which indicates the convergence of campus and distance learning provision. COL is working with campus universities in Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, Eswatini (Swaziland), Uganda and Zambia to support the integration of open distance and online learning for increased access.

Open learning also means inclusion. 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. Access therefore is not only about increasing enrolments but also about promoting flexibility, diversity and inclusion.

The second dimension of openness is availability of quality content. Affordability and costs are a key barrier to access in tertiary education. Let me refer to a study done in UCT which found that the students spend approximately US\$1400 for first year textbooks. The book allowance for students on a Bursary Scheme is about US\$280. <http://library.ifla.org/1703/1/232-raju-en.pdf>. Because of this, many students cannot buy textbooks. Does it matter? A study in 22 sub-Saharan African countries shows that textbooks are effective in improving learning; providing one textbook to every student in a classroom increased scores by 5–20% (Fehrler et al., 2009). A COL study on open textbooks in Antigua and Barbuda has shown that students in Antigua State College not only saved money but also improved learning outcomes by 5.5%. OER can help us reduce costs and improve effectiveness. The Cape Town Declaration in 2007, a major milestone in the OER movement, identifies other dimensions of openness. It refers to open technologies that promote more collaboration and flexibility.

The third pillar of openness is technology. We have witnessed major developments in the previous decade—MOOCs with their flipped classroom and global reach are increasing access but have they embraced ‘openness’? Blockchain technologies can help promote new ways of credentialing and accreditation. Artificial Intelligence is opening up new ways of teaching and learning. AI techniques can simulate one-to-one human tutoring to provide timely feedback, all without the presence of a human teacher. As we know, timely feedback is essential for learner engagement and retention.

Both campus and distance providers are addressing the common challenges of access, affordable content and improved learning outcomes. How can we learn from each other? What is the way forward?

One, all institutions will need to embrace open policies and open education practices. Two, we can never truly open up learning unless we have robust and innovative mechanisms to recognise and accredit learning across jurisdictions. 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 both teacher and learner are empowered to use the technology effectively.

Thank you for your kind attention. But before I sign off, let me extend a personal invitation to each one of you. COL is organising its ninth Pan Commonwealth Forum jointly with the Open University UK in Edinburgh during 9-12 September next year. I look forward to seeing you there.