Towards Resilient Education Systems: Lessons from COVID-19

27 April 2020

Virtual Round Table, UNESCO-IITE Moscow International Educational Fair

Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning. It is a privilege to be part of this virtual round table and I thank Mr. Tao Zhan and his team at UNESCO-IITE for the invitation.

My organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning with headquarters in Canada works in 54 Commonwealth countries which span all regions of the world.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training.

We are in an unprecedented situation today when over 90 % students are not able to attend schools due to COVID 19. What should be our response? Countries were clearly not prepared and started looking for immediate solutions. Distance and online learning seemed to be the only means of ensuring that students continue to learn. Since the teacher and learner are separated in distance learning, we do need technology for linking the two.

Does everyone have access to the kinds of technology needed in online learning? If we look at the global average for connectivity only half the world's population has access to the internet. The situation is much worse in developing countries, how do we reach students in such contexts?

Beyond the issues of access to electricity and connectivity are the challenges of having the right content and resources and the capacity of teachers to make the transition from face to face teaching to a distance and online mode. What can we do to ensure that we reach the unreached and include people with disabilities?

Open and distance learning or ODL was adopted by governments to address these concerns and has been flourishing for 50 years in both developed and developing countries.

ODL is an innovation that has evolved to serve the needs of different contexts and constituencies – by increasing access to education, improving quality, reducing costs, supporting inclusion and lowering the carbon footprint of the education sector.

Let us take access. When COL surveyed 27 open universities in the Commonwealth in 2016, we found that these institutions alone catered to 4.4 million students. Clearly this mode has served millions who would otherwise not have had access to tertiary education.

MOOCs have become an option of opening up greater access to millions around the world and can even lead to micro-credentials and degrees. Can MOOCs reach remote resource poor communities? COL has developed MobiMOOCs, which is a computer-basic mobile interface that has reached thousands of farmers in remote locations.

Quality has been a major concern for educators. Sir John Daniel identifies four dimensions of quality in distance learning—personal support to each learner, high quality multi-media materials, efficient administration and teaching that is rooted in research. As we know, that if done well, ODL delivery is as effective as campus provision.

Today, with the availability Artificial Intelligence, AR/VR and other advanced interactive technologies, the quality of teaching and learning can be enriched. Intelligent Tutoring Systems use AI to simulate one-to-one human tutoring and provide immediate feedback, all without the presence of a human teacher. Chatbots can be effective course tutors. Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality technologies can help us conduct virtual experiments and experience real-life situations even in a lockdown. What of resource-poor communities? COL has developed Aptus, a low-cost solar powered server that can be used to provide simulations and virtual experiments even in remote locations.

The costs of tertiary education continue to be prohibitive in many countries. In the USA, 65% students do not buy textbooks because of high costs. In developing countries like Uganda and Kenya the situation is no better. A student pays USD 266 for textbooks annually while her Kenyan counterpart spends USD 207. We believe that Open Educational Resources and open textbooks can make education more affordable and this is what COL and IITE are promoting.

Studies show that distance learning is cost effective. In traditional mega-universities, which achieve economies of scale, the costs per student can be anything from one half to one third of what it costs to put a learner through a campus institution.

Another study shows that online learning costs about half of what face to face provision can cost and is equally effective.

With 15% of the world's population suffering from some form of disability or another, the participation in education in different countries is dismal. Experts fear that this will become worse with the Covid crisis.

Research shows that more and more people with disabilities prefer distance learning. First, ODL allows them to study at their own pace, place and time. Second, ODL is more flexible and offers content in various formats so learners can read, listen or watch lectures. Third, ODL is more affordable as it costs significantly less than campus-based instruction. Finally, ODL also provides a degree of anonymity—where students with disabilities can interact with professors and peers without feeling discriminated.

The world is facing a climate crisis. The education sector, from primary to tertiary, contributes to both direct and indirect emissions, with an impact on environmental degradation and associated economic costs.

Following a study by the Open University, UK, COL conducted a similar study in Botswana, which found that the average carbon footprint of the face-to-face group is nearly three times greater than that of the distance learners This suggests that ODL can decrease emissions by reducing the need to travel.

Now, let me turn to how COL has responded to the COVID 19 situation within the framework of its mission and mandate.

Recognising the significant challenges faced by member states, we developed a comprehensive Rapid Response System covering generic capacity building and tailoring a solution for specific country needs.

With the OER Foundation in New Zealand, COL launched the OER4COVID initiative, which is supported by UNESCO-IITE, World Bank Open Learning Campus, Open Education Global and ICDE. Educators from 67 countries have registered to collaborate, learn and share knowledge and skills about using OER for online learning.

COL is offering two massive open online courses with Athabasca University, Canada on "Introduction to technology-Enabled Learning" and "Blended Learning Practice", as a first response to support teachers offering online learning.

A series of Webinars on design and development of MOOCs are being offered during April-May 2020.

Dr. Tony Bates, a leading online learning expert has recorded 12 short videos based on his highly successful book – Teaching in a Digital Age. These videos are a crash course in online teaching and will be available as OER.

We have also launched an "International Partnership of Distance and Online Learning for COVID-19" to provide a common platform for collaboration and sharing of educational resources and expertise. It has attracted over 40 institutions and organisations—IITE is a prominent partner.

Based on our recent experiences what would be the road ahead?

First, we need to think beyond the current crisis and integrate distance and online learning into all educational systems for better resilience. Second, be well prepared for any future disasters by being active members of global partnerships so that we can benefit from each others' strengths and resources. Third, we need to focus on innovations to serve people with disabilities and marginalised communities.

I hope some of these thoughts will resonate with you and as a global community let us resolve to work together to build a more equal world. Thank you.