

Challenges for eLearning during COVID-19



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Distinguished Colleagues, thank you for the invitation to be part of the 3rd International Conference on Distance and eLearning. My topic today is ‘Challenges for eLearning during COVID-19’ and this presentation is based on a recent report to Commonwealth Education Ministers prepared jointly with Sir John Daniel.

As you know, the Commonwealth of Learning or COL is an intergovernmental organisation with headquarters in Canada and works in 54 Commonwealth countries which span all regions of the globe.

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

The COVID-19 crisis has had an unprecedented impact on education—the education of more than 90% students globally was disrupted by institutional closures.

When the pandemic struck, the education sector was clearly not prepared and had to look for immediate solutions. eLearning was the preferred option. But how many students have access to electricity, computers and connectivity? Only half the world’s population have Internet access with a wide variation within the Commonwealth ranging from nearly 95% access in Brunei to less than 15% in some countries.

While the status of mobile subscriptions is more encouraging with over 100 % in most countries, access is not universal. What technologies do we use to ensure that we reach the last person in the queue?

In this presentation, I will look at the challenges for eLearning from four perspectives—first, social issues and the growing inequality that institutions need to combat. Second, the pedagogical challenge when teachers had to make the sudden transition to online mode. Third, the challenge of harnessing technology for teaching and learning and finally the psychological impact and the anxieties resulting from the uncertainty about the future.

While students with resources have continued to learn, it is the poorest children who have been hardest hit. UNESCO estimates that about 11 million girls may not return to school due to the crisis.

In pre-COVID 19 days, these children in a remote region in Bangladesh studied in boat schools, which picked them from the villages and dropped them home after classes were over.

As this is no longer possible today, the only way to reach them is to bring the teachers to the communities and maintain social distance. The only technology available to these children is print materials.

Another constituency that is in danger of being further marginalised during this crisis are people with disabilities. Even in normal circumstances, the participation of PWD in higher education has been low, especially in developing countries, such as India and South Africa.

Preety Daby in Mauritius could not pass her class 9 exam because of the lack of a braille textbook. Now that she has been provided learning resources and assistive devices she is doing well in class and plans to go to university.

More PWD prefer distance learning as it is more convenient, flexible, affordable and provides a degree of anonymity. AIOU has special programmes for persons with disabilities and can provide valuable lessons for other universities.

Because of the pandemic, youth unemployment is high globally—here again women and girls are more disadvantaged. In collaboration with COURSERA, COL offered free training opportunities to 100,000 persons around the Commonwealth. These girls from Fatima Jinnah Women’s University have successfully completed the programmes for workforce recovery from some of the top universities in the world.

Another impact of the pandemic has been low morale and motivation, especially among women and girls from remote regions. COL has initiated CommonwealthWiseWomen, a mentorship programme for underprivileged girls which links them with eminent women to develop leadership skills.

Let us now turn to the pedagogical challenge and how institutions can address issues of teaching and learning in this changed world.

No one was prepared for the sudden transition to eLearning. Teachers had to move from classroom lectures to online mode. Students had to learn remotely without any support and parents were expected to help students with their lessons. Would access to quality content help?

Researchers in Canada analysed three types of interactions—student-content; student-student and student-teacher—to identify what had the best impact on learning outcomes and they found that the student-content interaction was by far the most effective. Since content is important, where will we find it?

Today we have a vast resource of open content or OER on the Internet. OER are educational materials which have been made freely available under an open licence and can be adopted or adapted to local contexts.

A COL study in Antigua & Barbuda showed that using OER reduced the costs of textbooks for students and improved learning outcomes.

Khan Academy in the US has developed OER in maths and a range of disciplines that have been translated into Urdu, and this quality content is available for use as we make the transition to eLearning. COL has developed a repository of OER in higher education, teacher training and skills development that could be of use.

Learners needed a great deal of support during the crisis. Some institutions invested in 24/7 online hubs and call centres. Learning analytics have helped to provide personalised learning and kept the human touch alive.

The Open University of Malaysia has developed chatbots to provide personalised tutoring facilities to its learners.

Assessment has been a challenge during this crisis. AI-based assessment constantly provides feedback to learners, teachers and parents about how the students learn, the support they need and the progress they are making. Micro-credentials are leading to the possibility of offering shorter, just-in-time courses that can be taken at one's own pace or time. The crisis has highlighted the need for more flexibility and the need to offer continuous assessments through assignments and portfolios.

As teachers make the difficult transition from classroom teaching to online provision, they need capacity building. COL is offering free MOOCs on technology enabled and blended learning with Athabasca University for teachers anywhere in the world.

Now that the world has been forced to use technologies, we will need to ensure that these are available, accessible and affordable.

A recent survey of Stanford University students by Tony Bates found that 16% of undergraduates did not have access to the Internet for half the time and 60% undergraduates from low-income families did not have a private place to study. If this is the situation in a resource-rich university, how do we reach our students in developing countries?

There has been a renewed interest in the use of educational TV—such as the TeleSchool Pakistan initiative which is supplemented with SMS and web support for interactivity.

COL developed Aptus, a low-cost offline virtual classroom that provides learners in remote locations with access to digital resources. It is a server that works with a solar charger and a wireless router and costs approximately \$150. This was deployed in a school in Khyber Pakhtunwa, and we found that teachers were more motivated and students performed better because they had access to videos and other quality content.

Major MOOC initiatives have been taken in several Asian countries where thousands of courses are available in Asian languages. How do we reach those who do not have access to the Internet?

COL's MobiMOOC is a platform that works in low bandwidth situations and has an interface with basic mobile phones. This has been used successfully for training farmers during the lockdown and can be used to reach remote students in our universities.

If we want to reach out to students even in the remotest communities, we need to use a range of technologies from print to radio, TV, mobile delivery and the Internet.

The pandemic has also had a huge psychological impact—something we have not given much attention to in the past. Students are anxious about their future, feel they are being left behind and are isolated from their peers and friends.

When an earthquake hit New Zealand in 2011, the main focus was on providing emotional support to children and their communities. Now again when parents are suffering from job losses and students are dealing with school closures and isolation, the need for empathy and well-being has been highlighted as never before.

With more persons using technology, there are the challenges of cyber security, data privacy and the safety of networked devices.

Institutions have realised the value of frequent communications. For example, NIOS in India has established call centres to support learners. Similarly, Jamaica has provided free SIM cards to parents so they can access the help lines set up for them.

From the experience of this pandemic, one thing has become clear—that we need to find innovative solutions appropriate to the context so that we do not leave anyone behind.

Going forward we need to focus on the three Cs for effective eLearning—connectivity, content and capacity to provide access to quality education for all.

Countries need to invest in ICTs, which includes access to devices, connectivity and zero rating of educational platforms. New Zealand ordered devices for distribution, and ministries in South Africa and Jamaica have provided free access to platforms by partnering with telecom companies. Any investment in ICT infrastructure must make provision for reaching the last mile so that existing inequalities are not exacerbated.

There is an urgent need for quality eLearning courses. This would require a change in mindset to start using the content from the web and contextualising it to the local contexts.

For effective eLearning, we need to build the capacity of policy makers and practitioners. Governments can develop enabling policies and regulatory frameworks to promote blended learning to make the education sector more flexible and resilient to deal with future challenges. For institutions, the top priority would be to build the capacity of staff and students.

Research shows that blended learning works best in developing countries. Blended learning refers to a combination of eLearning and face-to-face provision.

Institutions can decide on the percentage of each component depending on the availability of resources.

COL has also developed several guidelines and instruments that provide practical advice to teachers/instructors for adopting effective eLearning approaches. COL also has a repository of curated content that you may find useful.

With that let me thank you for your attention.