

Is Distance Education, the Ugly Duckling, Finally a Swan?



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Distinguished colleagues, let me begin by offering a disclaimer. As I come from a traditional community in India, I was married mid-way during my bachelor's degree. The only way I could complete my higher education was through the distance mode. So if you find that I am an advocate of distance learning—you're right, I am. But most people think that ODL is second chance and second rate—in short the ugly duckling of higher education. Is this true? Has the pandemic transformed this ugly duckling into a swan?

It might help to first go back to the origins of this ugly duckling and how it has delivered value over the years. Yet strangely, negative perceptions continue to linger. No one in the history of education could have imagined the pandemic which disrupted the world as a black swan. Was this also the moment when the black swan catalysed the transformation of open and distance learning into a beautiful swan?

Where did the story begin and why?

As far back as 1728, the Boston Gazette advertised a shorthand course to persons around the country, offering 'several lessons sent weekly' and promising that they would 'be as perfectly instructed as those that live in Boston.' Distance or location would not compromise learning. When the penny post started in nineteenth century England, Pitman's shorthand training became a popular distance learning course. The ugly duckling was born as a start-up offering livelihoods opportunities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Children in the Canadian prairies with no schools for miles around, received lessons at home and were supported by parents and siblings. Sounds familiar during the pandemic?

Committed to 'reaching the shoemaker in his garrett' the University of London opened several centres overseas to offer external degrees in the erstwhile colonies in the nineteenth century, opening up access to those who would otherwise not have the opportunity.

UNISA started distance learning in 1946 during the apartheid years offering education to a multi-racial student body. Alumnus included Nelson Mandela who turned to distance education during his long incarceration.

The UK too felt the need to create an Open University to use technologies to reach those who did not have access to traditional campus institutions – a model that was adopted and adapted by policy makers across the world to throw open the ivory towers of learning.

Throughout its history, the impulse behind distance education was to reach the unreached – those in remote areas, marginalized communities and persons with disabilities.

Using Christensen's disruptive innovation model in higher education, we find that distance education was the real innovation at the bottom of the pyramid that continues to challenge the mainstream face-to-face higher education. Campus institutions have consolidated their position over 900 years of existence and the state, students and parents continue to sustain the demand for them making them elitist and exclusive. However, distance education began to cater to those who were left outside the mainstream.

Even with its focus on social justice and inclusion distance education continued to remain an unsung ugly duckling. It might help to review what we mean by distance education and open learning to understand this paradox.

Distance education primarily refers to the separation of teacher and learner which is mediated by some kind of technology – this is what we experienced when we pivoted to emergency remote learning during the pandemic.

Open education describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. While distance education and open learning are not the same, they are complementary.

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 basic philosophy of open and distance learning or ODL.

Put into practice this means that institutions have flexible entry requirements, allow learners to choose the courses they wish to study and accumulate credits at their own pace and convenience. Charles Wedemeyer was a visionary, who described openness way back in 1973 and this narrative was only familiar to distance educators!

Open and distance learning has developed over the years. Prof Taylor's five generations of distance learning sum up the evolution from correspondence education to multi-media to online provision which includes the use of AI in teaching and learning.

ODL meant structured learning which requires systematic planning, design and development. Learner support is critical and a range of technologies are used to reach learners in their own space, time and convenience. Research shows that blended learning is more effective in developing countries (John Baggaley).

ODL has proved its effectiveness by opening up access, improving the quality of learning, reducing costs, supporting inclusion and at the same time demonstrating a lower carbon footprint. Where is the evidence?

First, access. Distance education has been used around the world to democratise higher education. The 33 open universities in Commonwealth countries cater to over 5 million learners annually.

Second, quality. Research shows that there is ‘no significant difference’ between distance and traditional classroom instruction in terms of learning outcomes; yet there is a lingering perception, that distance education is not as effective as class-based education. In fact, the research shows that students in blended learning performed marginally better than those in the classroom.

Third, costs. Distance learning costs substantially less than campus provision. Another study found that while face to face costs per participant in a teacher training course were USD 6.7, the same training was offered online at half the costs with comparable outcomes.

Fourth, inclusion. PWD have also found distance learning more accessible. Studies show that more PWD join ODL institutions as they don’t need to travel to campus, seek accommodation near the institution. ODL is more flexible and offers content in various formats so learners can read, watch or listen to lectures. ODL provides a degree of anonymity where students with disabilities can interact with professors and peers without feeling discriminated.

Fifth, ecology. With all our concerns about climate change, studies in the UK and Botswana show that the carbon footprint of a distance learning student is one third compared to that of their campus counterpart.

The Open University of China used ODL for poverty alleviation by adopting targeted interventions to support village communities, which improved income and livelihoods for about 50,000 people.

In spite of all the benefits that ODL provides, paradoxically it has remained unsung and in the margins. Many countries make a clear distinction between qualifications acquired on campus and through ODL—often questioning the quality and integrity of this mode.

Years of advocacy would not have achieved the overnight pivot to ODL that the advent of the black swan triggered. I’m referring to Nassim Taleb’s eponymous book which refers to unexpected and sudden events that change the course of history.

Covid 19 has caused the biggest disruption of education in human history. The closure of campuses affected more than 220 million HE students worldwide.

At this time, there was a phenomenal increase in MOOC enrolments. Not just through global brands such as Coursera and FutureLearn but also universities, which had earlier hesitated to offer online courses came forward to offer MOOCs especially for professional development.

Who do the MOOCs reach? They do connect the world in a global classroom but more than 50% of those enrolled already have college degrees. Less than 30% have lower qualifications. How can this technology be used to cover the rest?

One silver lining during the pandemic has been the global acceptance of distance and online learning. A recent study in the UK found that the majority of HE students rated the quality of online learning as excellent. But because of lack of connectivity, purely online options do not work for everyone.

For examples, students in South Africa and Zimbabwe considered online learning elitist and called for its boycott. ODL has tried and tested alternatives for such students.

Open Educational Resources were in high demand as teachers looked for quality digital content. In a North American study conducted during the pandemic, 44% of administrators were positive about faculty use of OER, while a quarter of teachers believed that OER could contribute significantly to teaching and learning. A study conducted by OER Foundation and COL found that over 75% of the respondents expressed high demand for OER-based online courses.

The pandemic has also seen the second coming of video learning where teachers made significant contributions often reaching their students through mobile devices. COL developed a video-on-demand service for providing quality content in low-bandwidth contexts in the Pacific.

Formal assessments and proctoring systems suffered major setbacks during this time—where institutions adopted innovative approaches to build flexible models and make assessments more authentic. Open universities have always adopted formative assessments with multiple entry and exit points. Credits can be earned and stacked towards various qualifications similar to what is now being proposed as micro-credentials.

During the pandemic open universities were able to remain open even as campus institutions closed. India's ecosystem of distance learning comprises 19 open universities, educational TV channels and government supported MOOC platforms. The new National Policy on Education lays emphasis on ODL to 'improve access, increase GER and provide opportunities for lifelong learning'.

A survey conducted on distance students in Ghana found that online learning was only preferred when gadgets were made available, content presented well and students convinced of the benefits to them. The pandemic has led to the adoption of distance learning in some form or other by all campus institutions and the perceptions of both students and teachers are now more positive.

This was the moment when the ugly duckling was transformed. It is also the time to build on the momentum that ODL has gained and implement the lessons learned to transform higher education.

We know that even before the pandemic, it was estimated that most targets of SDG 4 — 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all' would not be achieved by 2030. The pandemic has set us back even further with severe learning losses globally. ODL approaches can be harnessed to accelerate progress towards achieving the targets and leaving no one behind.

At the recently held Conference of Commonwealth Education ministers in Nairobi, there was a clear call for increasing education expenditure to 6% of the GDP or 15-20% of the total public expenditure. Within the context of the current economic downturn, many governments may not be able to respond to this call. ODL can be a flexible and cost-effective means of meeting this demand. A study shows that the cost of higher education student per year in South Africa was R88,600 during 2018/2019 which was equivalent to US \$5,500. How can we expect to increase the GER in HE from 9.4% in Africa with this kind of huge investment using conventional, brick & mortar face to face education?

Teachers are central to any recovery efforts. In Italy teachers were convinced of the benefits of distance education because of the new teaching experience, saving of time and fuel and exchanging ideas with colleagues. This resulted in better outcomes for learners.

As countries skill and reskill citizens for the new normal, ODL will have a key role to play. The COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery project trained over 150,000 Commonwealth citizens, many of them first-time online learners. Establishing help desks to provide learner support and counselling resulted in higher completion rates. Since ODL is a viable option how can it be promoted?

Intergovernmental organisations such as UNESCO and COL can play a major role in advocating for mainstreaming ODL as a means of achieving sustainable development.

Governments can invest in national ODL policies, ICT infrastructure and capacity development.

Educational institutions can adopt targeted interventions to increase access, improve quality and reduce costs and carbon emissions by mainstreaming quality ODL.

To come back to the question of when the duckling will become a swan, the clear response is Distance education has always been a swan. It took one major pandemic to realise that it is not an ugly duckling.