Can ODL reach the unreached? Lessons from the Commonwealth

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Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)
Co-written with Dr Sanjaya Mishra, COL

INTRODUCTION

Vice Chancellor, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am really pleased to be at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) after a gap of nearly three years and I thank the Vice Chancellor, Professor Abdalla Uba Adamu, Professor Vincent Tenebe, and his team, for the invitation. I am particularly grateful to Dr Vincent Ogunlela for all the efforts he made to ensure that all preparations were smooth and seamless!

Let me begin with a brief introduction to the Commonwealth of Learning or COL which is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government, when they met in Vancouver in 1987. Our headquarters are in Metro Vancouver and we have a regional office – the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in New Delhi. Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to harness the potential of distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training. Our mandate is to work in the 53 Member States of the Commonwealth, which span all regions of the globe – from the Caribbean to Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Nigeria is an active member of the Commonwealth and provides financial and intellectual contributions to COL. Thank you, Nigeria. As a major donor, Nigeria has a seat on our Board of Governors. This is currently occupied by HE Ambassador Mariam Katagum, a great advocate of education and sustainable development. Her predecessor Professor Michael Omolewa, an eminent educationist and global statesman, is known to many of you. COL has also had very eminent Nigerian nationals on our staff. Alhaji Hafiz Wali and Dr. Abdurrahman Umar both formerly from NTI Kaduna, served COL at different periods of its development.

COL has enjoyed a close collaboration with several Nigerian institutions and particularly with the National Teachers' Institute (NTI), Kaduna since 2000. At that time the institute went through a strategic planning exercise to 'refocus, revitalise and restructure' and to renew its approach to distance learning. COL supported initiatives in the capacity building of staff that led to an improvement in the quality of course materials and gave NTI a leadership role not just in Nigeria but also among teacher training institutions in Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Uganda.

More recently, COL has been working with various institutions for skills development – a training event organised at the Yaba Institute of Technology demonstrated how distance learning and technology can be harnessed to increase access and reduce the costs of quality training. NOUN is also host to RETRIDOL, the institute that develops Open and Distance Learning (ODL) capacity not just in Nigeria but also in West Africa. This organises several capacity building activities in Nigeria and the ECOWAS sub-region, in course development, integration of ICTs and adoption of OER, to name some. A regional training workshop for women leaders was organised in Ghana.

NOUN is also a key member of a six-country partnership in Africa and Asia for collaboratively developing courses in Advanced ICT Skills. The objective of this project is to help youth in the Commonwealth gain skills for livelihoods. As a leading distance learning institution in Africa, NOUN offers the Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme along with institutions in 11 countries. NOUN was one of the first institutions to implement the COL Review and Improvement Model for the quality self-assessment of institutions. NOUN also holds a UNESCO-COL Chair in ODL. In 2013, COL organised its triennial conference the Seventh Pan-Commonwealth Forum with NOUN. This attracted over 600 participants from 50 countries who experienced the warmth and generosity of Nigerian hospitality.

My presentation today, which I have prepared with my colleague Dr Sanjaya Mishra, will begin with a brief review of the Nigerian context – which includes demography, the status of tertiary education and technology. We will then look at what we mean by Open and Distance Learning or ODL. Today we are in the fifth decade of ODL – what have been the major developments so far? Who are the unreached that we still need to reach and what have other Commonwealth universities done to reach these constituencies? Finally, we will draw on the lessons learned to propose strategies for reaching the unreached more effectively.

But first the context.

CONTEXT

Nigeria is a young country with 46% of its population between the ages of 15-35 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Half of these young people are women. The global rate of unemployment among the youth is about 14 %. The unemployment rate for young people in the 15-24 year age-group is similar. What levels of education do these young people have? It is significant that over 20% of the unemployed youth have gone through secondary education and 20% have had access to post-secondary education. Education is often seen as a way out of unemployment. What kind of education do we need to provide for livelihoods opportunities?

Even among the unemployed youth in Nigeria, young women in the age group of 15-35 are more likely to be unemployed than the young men. Similarly rural youth are more unemployed than their urban counterparts (Akande, 2014). How do we surmount the divides imposed by gender and geography? Can technology help? If we review the growth of ICTs in sub Saharan Africa, we find that there are about 20 internet users per hundred – therefore, this would not be an option. On the other hand, the real growth has been in the use of mobiles which exceed 70%. According to the ITU Statistics, the situation is better in Nigeria with over 40% access to the internet and nearly 80 persons per 100 with mobile devices. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics the GER for tertiary education in Nigeria was just over 13% in 2010. This is well below the OECD average of 40-50%, required for sustainable development. Over the period 2004 to 2009, there has been a steady increase in the number of qualified applicants

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seeking admission to Nigerian Universities, yet the intake has not exceeded 19% during this time. Clearly, alternative approaches are needed for absorbing the increasing demand for tertiary education.

Last year, the global community adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs that we must collectively achieve in the next 15 years. SDG Goal 4, which deals with education, aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. How do we plan to achieve this? One of the recommendations in the Framework for Action for achieving Goal 4 by 2030 is to 'develop policies and programmes for the provision of quality distance learning in tertiary education, with appropriate financing and use of technology, including the Internet, massive open online courses and other modalities that meet accepted quality standards to improve access'. The role of open and distance learning will become more important than ever before.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

The term open learning describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. 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). Open education is a philosophic construct that refers to policies and practices that allow entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender, or time constraints.

Many open universities do not insist on entry qualifications, allow learners to accumulate credits at their own pace and convenience and are flexible enough to allow learners to choose the courses they wish to study towards their qualification. In short, openness is about open entry, learning anywhere, anytime, and the freedom to choose courses (Kember, 2007). Educational institutions provide flexibility so that if the learners cannot come to the university, the university goes to the learner.

The distance education system refers to the separation of the teacher and learner. Because learners and teachers are separated by time and space, some kind of technology or media must be used for communication between them. Learner support is critical to facilitate social learning and interaction not just from the tutors but also through group formation (Keegan, 1986). Open learning is not the same as distance education but they are clearly complementary. Which is why we use the two terms together and the expression open and distance learning or ODL, would define the practice of NOUN as an open university.

Several new terms are now being used: elearning, online learning and virtual learning to mean that the learner uses a variety of media, not just computers, to learn. These are different forms of distance learning. Another recent term, that reflects the growing trend of mixing ODL with conventional face-to-face teaching, is flexible or blended learning. The growth rate for eLearning in Africa is 16.3%. According to the Ambient report 2015, Uganda has the highest growth rate in Africa at 45%, followed closely by Ghana and Rwanda. Nigeria will be the second largest buying country of eLearning technologies and services in Africa, next only to South Africa (Adkins, 2013).

The eLearning Africa report 2015 asked respondents, what are the most commonly used ICTs. Laptops came first with 19%, smartphone at 14% and PCs at 13% (Elletson & Burgess, 2015). This is a dynamic field and we would need to watch this space. Mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets may well supersede PCs and laptops in the near future. The same report surveyed the benefits of ICT in education. The top three uses identified were: one, to enhance learning; two, to equip students with digital skills to prepare them for the workforce and three, to access information.

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Research comparing distance education, online learning and face-to-face education has indicated that there is 'no significant difference' in learning outcomes. Bernard et al. (2004) after a meta-analytic review of 232 studies concluded that in many cases, the distance education (DE) group outperformed the traditional education group by over 50%. There were other instances to the contrary, and therefore, it could not be concluded that DE is better or worse than traditional education, reaffirming the conclusion that there is 'no-significant difference' between different forms of educational provision. Another meta-analysis study by Shachar and Neuman (2010) indicated that in 70% of the cases, students taking courses by distance education outperformed their counterparts in the traditionally instructed courses, which means distance education is becoming the "new normal".

FIFTH DECADE OF ODL

Rise of Open Universities

As governments and policy makers sought to expand access to education, reduce costs and improve standards, they realised that traditional brick and mortar solutions would not be enough. The success of the Open University UK captured the imagination of policy makers around the world but particularly in developing countries, where dedicated open universities were established. In 1988, there were only 10 open universities in the Commonwealth, of which four were in Canada and the UK. Nearly 30 years later that number has tripled. The growth has happened in developing countries. The five Open Universities in Commonwealth Africa, will soon be joined by open universities in Botswana and Kenya.

Distance education in Nigeria dates back to 1887, when several students enrolled as External Students for the University of London matriculation examination. The University of Lagos established the Correspondence and Open Studies Unit in 1973, which is now the Distance Learning Institute. This was subsequently followed by other universities largely for teacher education, and the National Teachers' Institute was established in 1976 as the dedicated distance education institution for teacher training. NOUN was established in 1983 and then revived again in 2002 (Aderinoye & Ojokheta, 2004; Ajadi, Salawu & Adeoye, 2008).

Open Universities around the Commonwealth are known to have enhanced access to higher education. NOUN caters to a student population of 120,000. Open Universities provide huge cost advantages to both students and governments as their cost of operation is much lower than conventional higher education institutions. The annual cost per student at the Korean National Open University is $186 as compared to nearly $3000 for a campus student. Similarly the costs for STOU students in Thailand are $226 compared to $876 in a campus university (Perraton, 2000). A study by the National Knowledge Commission (NKC), India, shows that mega-universities, which achieve economies of scale cost substantially less than campus institutions. Pakistan's AIOU costs 22%; China 40%; India's IGNOU 35% and the OUUK 50% as compared to campus universities (NKC, 2004).

The Open University, United Kingdom is renowned for its quality and has become the standard for other open universities around the world. It has been rated consecutively for the last seven years amongst top three universities in UK for student satisfaction. In 2015, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK, commended its quality for effective use made of independent external expert advisors in setting and maintaining academic standards, effective ongoing improvement to provide a comprehensive online resource for the development of modules and qualifications, for providing a wide range of support to enquirers and applicants in line with the University's commitment to open access and

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widening participation, for effectively embedding the needs of disabled students, and for its commitment to student success (QAA, 2015).

Rise of Dual Mode Institutions

In addition to dedicated single mode open universities, we also witnessed the rise of dual mode institutions during this period. A UNESCO report on South Africa shows that enrolments in the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Technikon SA, single mode universities, dropped by 21% as people had other options for distance education in the campus universities. Deakin, a dual mode institution in Australia, has one fourth of its students in the distance learning stream. Over 200,000 students are enrolled in the Campus of Open Learning, University of Delhi.

What are some of the advantages of dual-mode provision? The institution can reach larger numbers, and has access to academic talent. Classrooms can be used in the evenings and on weekends for tutorials for distance learning students. These institutions can provide access to a wider curriculum and generate more resources. With the advantages, come the challenges. The distance learning unit is not autonomous and often under-funded. Staff do not have the training required to deal with distance learning and they often have inadequate learner support. Within the institution it is often considered second class.

Of the 143 federal, state and private universities in Nigeria (NUC, 2016), only eight offer distance education programmes. Considering the large number of students seeking admission to higher education, the potential for offering distance education through a dual-mode system is high and worth consideration as a policy measure to improve the Gross Enrollment Ratio in higher education.

Rise of Open Educational Resources

There has been a phenomenal growth of OER in the last few years. In 2002, the term Open Educational Resources (OER) was coined at a meeting held at UNESCO. In 2012, with support from the Hewlett Foundation, COL and UNESCO organised the World OER Congress, which resulted in the Paris OER Declaration urging governments to release all educational materials developed with public funds under an open license, and that all such resources should be made available free to others. There has been an increase in number of OER policies in the last decade and several countries have made commitments to open education. Several countries in the Commonwealth such as South Africa, Mauritius and India, among others, have developed OER policies at the national level.

As we know, OER are educational materials which are free and freely available. OER can be reused and repurposed to suit different needs and could be available in any medium, print, audio, video, digital. One key difference between OER and other educational resources is that OER have an open license, which allows adaptation and reuse without having to request the copyright holder.

Open universities have traditionally built their reputations on the quality of their content. By making quality content free, OER offer a unique advantage to open universities by freeing faculty time from course development. This time can now be allocated to learner support, which needs more attention. Open universities can develop OER policies and build the capacity of their staff to harness the potential of OER. The rise of OER signals three shifts for ODL institutions. Traditionally open universities had an industrial model – the open universities of the future will be a more connected model. There are course development teams within open universities responsible for creating content. In future, 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 the consumer of content.

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Given the importance of ICT in education, how many institutions/countries have ICT in Education policies in Africa? Eight countries have ICT in Education policies developed over the last decade. You will note that only seven African institutions have OER policies, with the latest being the Open University of Tanzania. As an OER pioneer in Africa, NOUN recently received the organisational leadership award for Open Education 2016 from the Global Open Education Consortium. Warm congratulations to NOUN.

Massive Open Online Courses

Over the past five years, we have seen the phenomenal growth of Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs, a form of distance and online learning. MOOCs are online courses designed for large numbers of participants, that can be accessed by anyone, anywhere as long as they have an Internet connection, are open to everyone without entry qualifications and offer a full/complete course experience online for free (Mulder & Jansen, 2015). In 2015, more people signed up for MOOCs than in the previous three years combined. MOOCs are an important solution to three key challenges in the current education system: one, 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. NOUN is offering the first MOOC in West Africa with support for the technology platform from COL and the IIT-K, a good example of south-south collaboration.

REACHING THE UNREACHED

Let us now look at examples of how different institutions have deployed ODL, OER and MOOCs to reach the unreached. But first, who are the unreached? In education, the unreached are those groups of people who either have no access to education or have dropped out of the educational system without completing their desired goals, and therefore cannot fully participate in the economic and social development of their nations. They are unreached because they are located in remote regions without educational facilities or they may be too poor to afford education. In some cultures, women and girls are given low priority in terms of access to education. Language can also be a barrier for many communities who do not speak the dominant languages. Today 15% of the world's population suffers from some form of disability – how does our educational system reach out to this constituency? ODL has been reaching these groups successfully for over five decades.

Skills development is a major priority for most governments. Using video and television, COL has trained thousands of young people in various trades. As a consequence of this blended training, which is more cost-effective, Eunice Maganga from Kenya is now a trained construction worker and her income has increased by 150%. Honey gatherers in the remote forests of Uganda learn from experts in Makerere University in their local language, using basic mobile phones. Research shows that this has led to improved food security and the generation of assets among these communities.

Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU), India has developed a Nursing Assistant Programme for rural and tribal girls from remote regions. This 18 month course is provided free of cost, jobs are guaranteed in the local hospital after which the participants can return 15% of the costs of training to the university in small monthly instalments. The whole project can be summed up as: Learn, Earn, Partially Return.

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The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India has shown how quality distance education can reach the unreached such as jail inmates. Over 500 jail inmates at Tihar jail are able to access education and receive visits from IGNOU faculty and counsellors, thrice a week. This provides both academic and emotional support as well as helps empower the learners for future rehabilitation. (Singh, 2013).

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is a great example of providing access to the unreached in the remote Pacific Island countries. Learners in farflung atolls have to wait for the infrequent boats which bring their course materials. USP is using appropriate technologies to reach these learners. Working with partners in the University of the South Pacific, IIT Kanpur and UNESCO, COL offered a MOOC on Climate Change. Seventy percent of the participants were from the Pacific region. What contributed to the success of this MOOC was the cross-cultural exchanges and the use of social media. COL has been providing technical advice to partners in developing countries on how to offer MOOCs on Mobiles for Development. Our MOOC on Mobiles for Development reached participants in 116 countries. A new blended model began to emerge. In Sierra Leone, participants were given content on DVD and they used their limited bandwith to interact with tutors and complete their assignments. Participants in Zambia formed a group to study video materials and go online using the one available computer.

Aptus or the Classroom Without Walls is developed using readily available and low cost components at about $150. Aptus does not require power from the mains. We can use solar chargers instead. It does not require any connectivity. We use a wireless router. All this enables teachers and students to access good quality OER through this device. As of now, learners can access the Wikipedia for schools containing over 6000 articles. Or the 2000 Khan Academy videos, covering topics relevant to learners in primary schools or high schools. A whole library of free books is also available. In addition, teachers can develop and upload their own content. Aptus was deployed in Allama Iqbal Public School in the remote mountainous region of Swat, Pakistan and students were provided tablets. Students were excited by the multi-media options available and watched animated videos on each topic, which had formerly not been possible. Both the students and the teachers benefited – the academic performance of the students improved and the teachers' attitude towards their teaching practice changed.

The Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, situated in north-east India, provide free education to physically handicapped such as the visually impaired students and adopt tribal villages where they persuade poor tribal girls to pursue their studies. The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) has established a special unit called "Assistive Special Technologies" to assist learners with disabilities. The Open University of Tanzania has enabled persons with visual impairment to communicate with those with hearing disabilities, after acquiring ICT skills. The training has enabled deaf persons to acquire basic skills for using computers, plus additional skills on repair and maintenance of ICT equipment. Trainers and trainees developed their own sign language that they now use comfortably in training and practice. The acquisition of ICT skills has also increased the employability of students with visual impairment. Recently, three of the trainees of the programme have been hired by public and private sectors, where they are performing quite well.

WAY FORWARD

We have seen examples of how distance learning and technologies have been deployed for reaching the unreached. What are some of the lessons learned and what do we need to do to provide education and training to the last person in the queue?

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The first lesson is that reaching the unreached needs a targeted approach. It is important to have an institutional policy in place to identify and support the unreached groups. Policy guidelines are needed, to cater to groups who may require additional support in terms of reduced programme fees; or for creating access centres using mobile vans, for example in the case of nomadic groups. In 2011/12, COL supported a programme for the training of teachers in nomadic communities in Nigeria. An audio-vision programme was designed to help nomadic teachers implement a constructivist approach in their teaching and learning (Koumi, 2015).

The second lesson is that we must use technologies that are appropriate affordable and available. How can we integrate two-way interaction to create cooperative and collaborative learning environments? Mobile technology has emerged as a solution to reach the unreached at low-costs. In the L3F programme of the COL, the mobile phone is used as a learning tool for training women to develop small businesses. A basic mobile phone was also used for the MOOCs for Gardeners offered by the IIT Kanpur with COL support.

The third lesson is that in order to reach the unreached, it is important to develop need based courses, through which the local communities get employment and livelihoods, and the local industry and service sector gets trained human resources. Industry partnership in programme development would benefit to create curricula that are appropriate and relevant to make learners employable.

Go Dual Mode

What then is the way forward? In a large country like Nigeria, with such a huge demand for tertiary education and skills training, it will be important to offer more open and distance learning at all levels. If you are a campus institution and wish to develop an institutional policy for offering distance education, you would need to review the mission and mandate of your institution. What are the reasons for going dual-mode and what you will do to achieve your goals? How will the faculty contribute – would they require training or additional incentives? How will you provide support to the distance learners? How will you ensure that the quality and standards are maintained for both campus and distance students? What systems do you need to put in place to cater to the large numbers and deal with the logistics of preparing and distributing study materials?

Invest in Quality Assurance

The next step is to invest in quality assurance process and practices. We believe that open universities and campus providers have the same purpose that all universities serve. And if all institutions are judged according to the same benchmarks, there is less likelihood of Open and Distance Learning being considered second rate. The Open University, UK is assessed like any other university by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). It is true that many open universities have a social mission and a more flexible delivery mode. But if the judgements are based on fitness for purpose, quality of courses, effective learner support, and student achievement, there is no need for separate QA regulations only for ODL provision. There are several guidelines and toolkits available, including the COL-RIM (COL, 2014).

Capacity Building

The third step would be to 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 would be some areas of focus. Good learner support services (including student engagements, providing feedback at regular intervals, and study skills support) improves student learning and reduces retention (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009). Simpson (2009) says, the inherent 'distance education deficit' is due to the mindset of

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'e-teaching' and the transactional distance a course creates between the student and the institution by not considering two-way communication requirements to succeed. Simpson further reported several examples of proactive learner support that resulted in increased retention of between 5%-46%. As far back as 1977, a review of literature on written instructions by Kulhavy (1977) indicated that feedback improves student learning; immediate feedback helps more than delayed feedback (Kulik & Kulik, 1988). How can we design assessment systems in ODL practices that can provide feedback to the learners quickly in both formative and summative evaluations?

All the three steps proposed, such as developing a policy, establishing robust QA and capacity building, can be taken up simultaneously since they involve three different entities. COL will be happy to accompany you on this journey.

In September 2000, a national workshop on distance education was organised at the ECOWAS Secretariat, at which a plan was developed for a decade of distance education. One objective was to reopen NOUN and to provide higher education to one million qualified candidates. Another was to build the capacity of 20,000 distance educators in the country. Have we achieved these targets? What new targets do we need to set for ensuring quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030? (SDG 4)

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