

Sustainable Higher Education in a Post-COVID World



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Prof Melinda Bandalaria, distinguished colleagues, thank you for the invitation to be part of this important discussion on 'Towards the University of the Future'. My topic today is 'Sustainable HE in a post-COVID world.'

But first a word about my organization, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). COL is an intergovernmental organisation with headquarters in Canada and a regional office in New Delhi. COL works in 54 Commonwealth Member States 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.

In this presentation, I will begin by outlining some of the key issues for education that emerged during the pandemic and then share examples of how COL promotes learning for sustainable development. I will then look at how different universities have adopted the sustainability agenda over the years. Finally, I will conclude with what lessons we can draw from the pandemic to build the sustainable higher education that we want.

All countries, both developed and developing, faced major disruptions.

During the pandemic, we found the greatest challenge related to digital infrastructure - lack of access to devices, connectivity, electricity. Teachers were not prepared for the sudden transition to online learning. Existing inequalities have been further exacerbated.

In a survey conducted at Stanford University, 16% of the undergraduate students did not have access to the internet for half the time and 60% of students from low-income homes did not have a private space for study.

Teachers are central to our mission - over 63 million teachers were impacted by COVID-19. Data from OECD countries indicates that only 60% of teachers had some training in ICTs.

In SSA, most teachers lacked the digital skills needed to offer quality distance learning.

The vulnerable are most impacted in crisis situations. It is estimated that the numbers of school dropouts will increase, with 11 million girls not likely to return.

There is a learning crisis in most countries. A study in the Netherlands records a learning loss of about 3%, with higher losses among students from less-educated homes.

The only silver lining at this time has been the global acceptance of distance and online learning. A recent study in the UK found that the majority of higher education students rated the quality of online learning as excellent. What implications does this finding have for the sustainable higher education?

But first let us look at how COL uses distance and online learning to promote learning for sustainable development—which means learning must contribute to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

One example of economic growth was the COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery collaboration, where over 150,000 Commonwealth citizens were offered free skilling and reskilling opportunities from some of the top universities in the world. Even though connectivity was often a challenge, learners used mobile devices or library facilities in what has been a life-changing experience for thousands.

We know that a large percentage of graduates from our universities lack the skills for employment. During this time, COL supported universities to integrate employment pathways into their systems.

As part of social inclusion, COL uses affordable and accessible technologies to reach the bottom billion. Open Educational Resources are another solution to improving the quality and reducing the costs of education.

In partnership with the OER Foundation at the Otago Polytechnic, COL launched OER4COVID which attracted participants from 89 countries. The survey conducted found that participants did not simply want access to repositories or general capacity building but rather sought urgent help with curated content aligned to the curriculum.

For low bandwidth contexts, COL responded by developing a video-on-demand service using OER, in STEM subjects aligned to the curriculum in Fiji, Nauru and Samoa.

Finally, as part of its environmental conservation agenda, COL supported the development of a Green Teacher programme in Nigeria which helps teachers inculcate environmental concerns among learners. COL offered MOOCs on Business for Sustainable Development and on the Blue Economy with universities in Mauritius and the Seychelles.

These are concrete examples of what worked in different contexts. How can such interventions be integrated into sustainable higher education?

The global community has included higher education in Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aspires to ensure equitable access to quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. Targets include ensuring i) equal access to affordable and quality tertiary education and ii) that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development.

One option for offering affordable quality higher education is open universities. The 31 open universities in the Commonwealth cater to nearly five million learners.

In the past three decades, several initiatives have emerged to promote sustainability in higher education. As Caird and Roy sum up, these are related to greening the curriculum, greening the campus and using distance and online learning. Let us look at examples of each.

University of the Philippines and Simon Fraser University in Canada offer specialized courses in environmental literacy. The University of Pretoria has adopted a transdisciplinary approach to curriculum enhancing community-based learning experiences, and the agile shift to virtual teaching for sustainability.

Several universities including the Australian National University and Groningen have strategies in place to green the campus and reduce emissions through adopting renewable energy and promoting resource conservation.

Adopting distance and online learning can promote environmental sustainability. The SusTEACH project, supported by the Open University, UK compared the carbon emissions of ICT-enhanced and face-to-face courses and found that distance teaching models had significantly lower environmental impacts (Caird et al. 2013; Caird et al. 2015). COL conducted a similar study in Botswana and found that the average learning-related carbon footprint of the face-to-face group is nearly three times greater than that of the distance learning group.

What have we learnt from these different initiatives in promoting sustainable higher education? One, that the sustainability agenda has to move from pilot phase to mainstream. Two, in countries where resources and incentives were provided, this agenda was more successful, as in the US. Partnerships and platforms have been effective in helping advocacy efforts and sharing best practice. For these initiatives to achieve scale, we need committed leadership at management, student and community levels.

In conclusion, let us look at six issues that emerged during the pandemic and how we can learn from this experience to build sustainable higher education.

First, we have seen that purely online options do not work for everyone. The future will be a blend of online and in-person approaches, using a range of technologies that are affordable, accessible and available. Because of existing digital divide, for technology to be effectively harnessed, it must be placed in an appropriate social, cultural and political context.

Second, as the pandemic forces governments to cut back on resource allocations, we will need to look for cost-effective solutions to bring quality learning for all. Mainstreaming OER by building the capacities of teachers and policy makers and preparing learners on how to find, use and share OER could be another way forward for building sustainable higher education.

Third, we have seen a huge rise in self-directed learning during the pandemic, as we can see from the phenomenal increases in MOOC enrolments—we can build on these foundations to promote lifelong learning for all, making sustainable higher education a reality.

Fourth, learning approaches, credentialing and recognition strategies will need to change. Formal assessments and proctoring systems suffered major setbacks during the pandemic—how can we learn from the innovative approaches that people adopted to build flexible models that make assessments more authentic? NZQA has developed a micro-credential framework to provide industry, employers, and/or the community to develop programmes and certify achievement for a coherent set of skills and knowledge. This could be a model to promote lifelong learning through an evidence-based assessment of learning outcomes.

Fifth, the pandemic has highlighted the critical need for learner support not just for academic matters but also for general well-being and mental health. Parents and siblings became a critical resource in supporting learning—how can universities develop an ecosystem of learner-teacher-parent to support success and sustainability?

Sixth, in order to address the growing inequalities, governments and institutions need to develop policies that address the needs of the last person in the queue - women, girls, those in remote regions and persons with disabilities. The policies that target the margins are also effective in serving the centre.

What then is sustainable higher education? It is education that is affordable and accessible for all. Universities need to align more closely with the needs of their societies and promote research that leads to sustainable development. And finally universities must play a leadership role in modelling sustainable behaviours that lead to the prosperity of the people and the planet.

On that note, let me thank you for your kind attention.