Achieving Lifelong Learning for All: Where are we now? What next?

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Distinguished Colleagues. What a pleasure to be here in this winter wonderland. I thank the organisers and the core programme committee for the invitation. My topic today is 'Achieving Lifelong Learning for all: Where are we now? What next?' and I have prepared this presentation with my colleagues Alexis Carr, K Balasubramanian and Sanjaya Mishra.

But first a word about my organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning. COL was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver in 1987 and ever since we've been in beautiful British Columbia. COL is an intergovernmental organisation that works in 53 countries that span all regions of the globe.

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

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

This aligns us closely with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 which aspires to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

In this presentation, I will first outline the global context wherein lifelong learning becomes more important than ever before. I will then focus briefly on what we understand by lifelong learning. This will be followed by an overview of how five Commonwealth countries are implementing lifelong learning. Technology has a major role in promoting lifelong learning for all and I will highlight this with some examples from COL's work. In conclusion, I will look at the way forward as we try and achieve lifelong learning for all by 2030.

First the context.

If we look at the world today, we note very young continents such as Africa where the median age is 19, while several other regions, including Europe, are greying. Both young and mature populations, are in need of some form of learning that contributes to livelihoods or well-being.

750 million adults in the world are illiterate, two thirds of them being women. How can they be reached?

One out of five children or youth are not in school. While this may seem strange here, many developing countries are struggling to bring millions of young people back to school.

Many countries have achieved universal primary education, but even today at least ten per cent of those who complete primary school do not make the transition to secondary schools.

The GER in tertiary education globally is over 35%, but many developing countries are still well below 10%.

Even where there is increased access to tertiary education, there is high unemployment. Half the youth surveyed by a McKinsey report were not sure that their post-secondary qualifications would lead to a job—58% employers did not believe that new graduates were well prepared for work.

We need to provide access to primary, secondary and tertiary education, skill people for the future of work and cater to the needs of the third age. Given the magnitude of the challenge, lifelong learning is no longer an option but an imperative for sustainable development.

What do we mean by lifelong learning? The term may have emerged in the 1960's but the concept goes back to ancient times.

The Edgar Faure Report (1972) made the initial formal statement on lifelong education, which highlighted a holistic approach for the complete development of the individual. In the 70's the focus was on 'education' and in the 1996 Delors Report, we can see a transition to 'learning'. We can see the emphasis shift to learner centric approaches, the need for self-directed learning and the view that learning can take place beyond formal education in a variety of settings and contexts.

Formal education only accounts for a small fraction of the time we spend in learning. In 16 waking hours during grades 1 to 12, we spend 18.5 % time in formal learning environments—and this keeps decreasing as we transition to undergraduate and graduate study. The rest of our waking lives are spent in informal learning environments. How can mandatory education and voluntary learning be integrated?

As we know, lifelong learning is a continuum from cradle to grave. It can take place in formal, non-formal or informal contexts. The motivation could be employment-related or for personal, social or cultural reasons.

According to Aitchison, there are two competing visions of lifelong learning—one visionary and all-encompassing, the other driven by utilitarian considerations related to competencies and the world of work.

With three years into the SDG 4 what are countries doing to accelerate progress towards achieving lifelong learning for all? Let us take the cases of five countries in the Commonwealth—Australia, Malta, Singapore, South Africa and Trinidad & Tobago.

Australia promotes lifelong learning to skill and reskill citizens for a dynamic economy. Adult Learning Australia is the key organisation promoting lifelong and lifewide learning. It addresses issues related to: literacy, non-formal learning, indigenous education, young people, ageing population, and rural Australia. Australia has always believed in the power of open and distance learning from the early days when home

schooling was common. There is no comprehensive national policy on lifelong learning which would serve to coordinate the formal and non-formal and informal sectors.

However, Australia has an overarching national Qualifications Framework that includes Recognition of Prior Learning so that credit can be given for non-formal and informal learning. It is being reviewed to reflect recent developments such as the micro-credentials and MOOCs as well as social and enterprise skills. The AQF has served as a model for the development of qualifications frameworks internationally.

Malta believes that lifelong learning should contribute to economic development, increased social participation and personal well-being. Malta has made lifelong learning an integral part of its Education Strategy and has a National Lifelong Learning Strategy which is being implemented through its adult learning centres. Malta also has a national qualifications framework, but one area that needs further consideration is recognition of prior learning and alternative qualifications.

Malta recognizes the potential of Open Educational Resources or OER to support lifelong learning, by providing locally relevant quality content at reduced costs. With the support of the Commonwealth of Learning, a draft national OER policy was developed and is under discussion.

Singapore aims to build a competitive economy by investing in Singaporeans to develop their fullest potential through continuous skilling and reskilling. The government provides the funds for several programmes that support career guidance, job searches, and placements. However, despite these incentives, some employers have been slow to embrace the opportunities offered.

The Singaporean government has invested significant resources in lifelong learning. All Singaporeans aged 25 and above receive an opening credit of S$500 to encourage them "to take ownership of their skills development and lifelong learning". In addition, a mid-career enhancement subsidy covers up to 90% of course fees for those over the age of 40 so that older members of the workforce can become lifelong learners.

South Africa has a visionary national policy and strategy on lifelong learning which aims to redress post-apartheid social inequities. To enhance recognition of learning and learner mobility, the South African National Qualifications Framework encompasses learning through all stages of life, from early childhood to adult education and higher education. There are strong linkages between skills training and the labour market and the government has launched a national career advice portal called Khetha. One challenge is the tension between lifelong learning for economic growth and lifelong learning for social equality as in some cases economic growth can in fact widen social inequalities.

South Africa believes in open and distance learning as a viable strategy for achieving lifelong learning. As far back as 1995, the African National Congress stated that 'to meet the challenge of lifelong learning successfully, we need to recognise the delivery of education and training within an open learning framework'.

Trinidad and Tobago sees lifelong learning as a means of creating a diversified knowledge economy within the framework of sustainable development. It focuses on learning from early childhood education, to skills training and tertiary education. A multifaceted approach to lifelong learning is framed within the Policy on Tertiary Education, Technical and Vocational Education and Training, and Lifelong Learning, and operationalized by various ministries and departments.

However, the main challenge has been the effective integration of technology.

The government of Trinidad and Tobago engages local communities in support of lifelong learning. Community-based telecentres offer free access to courses for livelihoods and social empowerment. By reaching out to communities and working with NGOs, the government is able to reach the unreached.

As we have seen the five countries place their policies and strategies within a visionary frame but ultimately follow a utilitarian approach. These countries adopt strategies relating to Qualifications Frameworks, OER, ODL, incentives and community engagement. Lifelong learning is understood differently in different contexts. In spite of the attempts to broaden the frame of reference, we still find the focus on the formal education sector. Governments are playing an active role but there is need for better coordination between different ministries and stakeholders.

Let us now turn to the role of technology in implementing lifelong learning. What does the COL experience show?

If we look at the growth of technology, at the end of 2018, while 51% of the global population had access to the internet mobile penetration had crossed 100%. How can we harness mobiles to promote lifelong learning?

In India, women entrepreneurs at the bottom of the economic pyramid established a farm producers company with COL support. These illiterate women learnt corporate finance through their basic mobile phones. In the past two years over 140,000 women in 11 countries have been lifted out of poverty and every dollar invested has resulted in assets worth 16 dollars.

These opportunities for learning have resulted in empowerment. Mary Arogya is a school dropout and grandmother who knew nothing about computers. As part of COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers project, she is now working as a content and web manager for a farmers' organisation, has uploaded hundreds of resources on YouTube, Facebook and trained over a thousand other farmers.

COL developed Aptus a low-cost offline virtual classroom that provides learners in remote locations with access to digital resources. It's a server that works with a solar charger and a wireless router and costs approximately $ 150. This is used to train women and girls in remote communities on financial literacy in preparation for livelihoods. Many of these girls had dropped out of school but the process of learning empowered them to return.

Open and distance learning is a tried and tested method for expanding opportunities for lifelong learning. Samina was married at the age of 12 and now at 22, she has three children who want her to help with their homework. The Open School in Bangladesh gave her the second chance that she needed to complete her schooling.

MOOCs continue to provide opportunities for lifelong learning. COL has tailored blended MOOCs to suit the needs of developing countries and these gardeners in remote locations have been reached by an audio-MOOC through their basic mobile phones.

The COL experience shows that ICTs by itself will not help us achieve lifelong learning but must be placed in an appropriate social political and economic context. The bottom billion can be reached by providing simple technology solutions such as basic mobile phone interface, social media integration and open content designed for delivery in low bandwidth situations. Technology solutions designed for the last person in the queue have the potential to benefit even privileged constituencies.

In conclusion, what next? As we have seen, we will have to go beyond the 'business as usual approach' and shift the current paradigms if no one is to be left behind.

The present approaches have focused more on acquiring skills and competencies for livelihoods, helping adapt to the changing circumstances with the main emphasis still being on formal learning.

The first shift would be to move beyond acquiring skills and competencies to transformative learning. This would mean not just adapting to changing circumstances but acquiring the ability to change circumstances.

According to Mezirow transformative learning enables us to make our own interpretations rather than act on the beliefs, judgements and feelings of others. We need to make our own interpretations— transformative learning develops autonomous thinkers.

The SDGs aim to transform the world for the people, planet, prosperity and peace. If such goals are to be achieved lifelong learning should be perceived beyond acquiring skills and competencies and focus on empowerment. Such an approach will also lead to environmental conservation and peace.

In Kenya, COL supported women to start agri-enterprises and a recent study found that learning led to empowerment and for every 1% increase in empowerment, there was a 2.3% increase in profits. By strengthening informed decision making and enhanced ability to make choices, empowered women could access and manage resources effectively leading to economic benefits.

Second, there is a need to shift the emphasis from formal education alone to a blend of formal, non-formal and informal learning. The teacher-led sequential learning in formal education needs to be supplemented with unstructured learner-led approaches to support the learning needs of individuals at different stages of their lives. Open and distance learning can be a very powerful means of not just expanding access to formal education but also supporting non-formal and informal learning—as you have seen from the COL experience.

Formal learning relies on codified knowledge which constitutes 20% of what we know. Informal learning is based on tacit knowledge which is informal, personal intuitive or acquired through our experience. Think of the large reserves of indigenous knowledge, language and cultures that are not yet part of global knowledge flows.

'The centrality of tacit knowledge to the production and reproduction of society has typically been unrecognized' and is one of the hidden dimensions of lifelong learning. Livingston's study based on New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) in Canada showed that more than 70% of the workers identified informal and tacit learning as the most important source of job knowledge. There is evidence to show that informal and tacit learning is the main source of knowledge generation among farmers in many countries.

Third, the operationalisation of lifelong learning involves moving beyond pedagogy to the integration of three approaches: pedagogy, andragogy and heutagogy. In pedagogy, the learner depends on the teacher for what and how to learn. Under andragogy, the adult learners are more independent, learn when they need to and use their own experiences. But what is learned is still determined by the teacher. The heutagogic approach applies to the independent learner, who determines what and how to learn and the learning is not planned and can take place anywhere. Blaschke's pyramid reflects the lifelong learning process. 'Engagement' indicates participation while 'cultivation' refers to autonomous and self-directed learning. 'Realisation' occurs when the learner is mature and autonomous—and can transform circumstances rather than simply be transformed by them.

Can heutagogy be integrated into formal learning programmes? According to Blaschke (2012:63) educators in the nursing, engineering and education professions have found heutagogy to be a credible response to the critical issues that the learners are faced with…. The University of Western Sydney has implemented the heutagogical approach in its teacher education programme which has resulted in improved teacher outcomes and more capable teachers (Blaschke, 2012). Canning and Callan (2010) have found that the heutagogical approach in three higher education institutions in the UK have led to reflective learning.

The heutagogical approach can be implemented through learner-defined learning contracts, flexible curriculum, learner-directed questions, flexible and negotiated assessments, collaborative learning etc.

We have looked at three possible paradigm shifts--what can different stakeholders do to achieve these?

Intergovernmental organisations such as COL and UNESCO can provide advocacy and policy support. While each context is different, a global framework for implementing LLL and monitoring progress is required. IGOs can share good practice and lessons learnt from different countries and forge regional and global partnerships.

Governments can focus on a holistic approach for transforming their societies. Existing accreditation mechanisms which focus on formal education need to be revisited to include non- formal and informal learning as well. Governments can adopt a targeted approach to promoting indigenous knowledge, languages and cultures. Policies on ICT infrastructure and governance will determine how technology can close rather than widen divides. Incentives for lifelong learning will be important to ensure this transition.

Institutions too have a key role to play in providing seamless pathways between learning that takes place in different contexts and times. Learning approaches, credentialing and recognition strategies will need to change. ODL, OER and technology enabled learning will be major mechanisms in dealing with the magnitude of the challenge, particularly providing cost-effective ways to lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Let me leave you with the image of this learner who completed her secondary school with distinction at the age of 94. She is the highly motivated Kathyayani, who has not only transformed herself but is also inspiring and motivating others around her to become lifelong learners. Can we set up systems and processes that help support lifelong learners like her?