Growing Capacities for Sustainable Distance eLearning Provision

Presentation Transcript

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It's good to be here and I thank the organisers ICDE and UNISA for the invitation. 'Growing Capacities for sustainable distance and eLearning' is our theme today. Let us look at how distance and eLearning can be deployed to achieve sustainable development.

First the question: what is sustainable distance and eLearning?

As we know from past experience: distance and eLearning have opened up access and promoted equity by offering more affordable opportunities for quality education. The emphasis on access, equity, costs, quality and flexibility are sound foundations for sustainable distance and eLearning. But have we overcome the crisis of credibility that continues to haunt many ODL institutions?

The second element of the theme is 'growing capacities'—are we simply looking at growing the capacities of distance and eLearning or are we focusing on growing the capacities of the learners that we serve? How can we move from capacity to capability?

The Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, believes that increasing the freedoms that men and women enjoy promotes development, and greater freedom empowers people to be more effective agents of development. Learning must enable people to exercise their freedom 'to be and to do'.

Prof Amartya Sen proposes the capability approach which helps us to see that learning and acquiring skills are not an end in themselves but steps that help individuals and societies achieve development outcomes. This approach encourages us to think beyond outputs such as acquiring a degree to outcomes—how this degree will lead to a better quality of life. It also shifts the focus from developing capacity to capability and to the question—now that we have the capacity, what will we do with it? We develop skills

or what Prof Sen calls 'functionings'—how can these enable us to overcome the constraints of our daily existence and make a change for the better?

What are the capabilities that educational institutions must impart? Walker, who has worked on the capability approach, investigated the capabilities that girls in school in South Africa thought important and came up with three: one, personal autonomy and independence of thought; two, ability to enter the world of work and three, an identity and a voice that would get respect and recognition. (Walker, 2005, p. 109; qtd, Alan Tait, 2013 unpublished paper).

Against this context, COL's new Strategic Plan 2015-21 is entitled 'Learning for Sustainable Development'.

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 with the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the global community.

Goal 4 of the 17 SDGs identified is the standalone goal on education that focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

The goal has several targets: one, quality education must lead to effective learning outcomes, two, we must focus on developing skills for employment, entrepreneurship and global citizenship, and three, the need for having qualified teachers in place to achieve these targets. How can distance and eLearning support the achievement of these targets?

Let us look at some examples of COL's work where we have deployed distance and eLearning to support economic development, social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

This is Eunice Maganga, a young Kenyan woman, who had always wanted to be a builder like her father. Eunice studied a free course in building technology, using blended approaches and is now working as semi-skilled labour and has increased her daily income by 150%. *The college is Coast Institute of Technology

Millions of farm families do not have access to learning in developing countries. COL offers a new approach called the Lifelong Learning for Farmers. This unique programme has lifted thousands of farmers out of poverty. For every dollar invested, income and assets worth $9 have been generated among these farmers, who became distance learners using basic mobile phones.

This young woman from Bangladesh says 'I left school at the age of 12. I am 22 now and have 3 children. I went back to the open school so that I could help my children with their schoolwork'.

Many governments have introduced tablets in their schools. How do we reach children under this tree, who are far from the electric grid and internet connections?

Aptus or the Classroom Without Walls is one possible solution. COL has developed it by using readily available and low cost components, and it costs about $ 100. 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 digital materials, through this device.

Commonwealth Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for Small States (VUSSC). All 31 small states of the Commonwealth are members of this network.

Environmental sustainability is a central concern for many of these states. Here is a graduate of the VUSSC programme on Sustainable Agriculture at the National University of Samoa.

These examples demonstrate what we mean by learning for sustainable development. We believe that giving people the opportunity to learn increases their freedoms 'to be and to do' and helps accelerate progress towards achieving international development goals. What can distance and eLearning institutions do?

Will sustainable distance and eLearning mean advancing the SDGs? Will it mean embracing the impact of OER and MOOCs?

Let us look at the impact of OER. Quality content had always been the family silver of open universities. Now that we have quality OER will we focus more on learner support? Open universities were built around an industrial model—the open universities of the future will be a more connected model. The course development teams within universities will be replaced by more global teams around the globe. How can we encourage the learner to be the producer rather than the consumer of content?

Similarly MOOCs are having an impact on the way we teach and learn. Open universities have traditionally operated within national or regional jurisdictions. With the MOOC platform, the world has become a connected classroom. Students had limited interactions with their tutors in study centres. Now there is a greater emphasis on peer to peer interactions. Are we ready for the change?

We can revisit the philosophy of 'openness' on which the open universities were first founded. Lord Crowther, the founding chancellor of the Open University, UK defined openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas How can this open-ness lead to learners acquiring the capabilities to exercise independence of thought towards empowerment? Or develop the capability of gaining access to livelihoods?

From the discussion so far it would seem that sustainable distance and eLearning will need to support the entire spectrum of lifelong learning. The transition from capacity to capability will empower both learners and teachers. In short, distance and eLearning can become more sustainable by contributing to national and international development.

With that, thank you for your kind attention.