

Higher Education and Learning for the Future: leaving no one behind



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Distinguished Colleagues, let me begin by thanking the Globethics Executive Team for the invitation to be part of this online international conference. My topic today is 'Higher Education and Learning for the future: leaving no one behind.'

But first a word about the Commonwealth of Learning. As you know, COL is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government with headquarters in Canada. We work in all 54 Member States which cover all regions of the globe.

Our mission is to help Member States and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training.

In this presentation, I will look at the impact of Covid-19 on higher education. I will then focus on the emerging landscape of higher education and some of the international interventions that helped teachers and students find creative solutions to the challenges at this time. This will lead to a reflection on the futures of learning and how we can build on the momentum generated to take the road ahead to a better post-covid world.

As we know, Covid-19 has caused the biggest disruption of education in human history where over 95% students worldwide were impacted.

The closure of campuses affected more than 220 million HE students worldwide.

Most institutions had to pivot to emergency remote teaching. Many did not have adequate technology infrastructure. The mobility of international students plummeted with countries losing large revenues from student fees. Budget cuts were imposed by governments — research reliant on practical work and external collaborations suffered most.

Data from OECD countries indicates that only 60% of teachers had some training in ICT. And yet teachers rose to the occasion. A survey conducted in Europe found that most teachers live-streamed lectures synchronously. A large number of teachers also used asynchronous approaches by sending pre-recorded videos and audio lectures.

A study in the US and Canada revealed that over 50% of teachers required help with supporting remote students, needed access to digital materials and wanted assistance with technology. The situation was not much different in the developing Commonwealth.

Students, too, suffered in various ways--and half of them felt that their performance had declined. Many faced challenges relating to technology tools and connectivity and most felt an impact on their psychological well-being.

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

The vulnerable are most impacted in crisis situations and existing inequalities were further exacerbated. The pandemic has deepened the learning crisis. A study in the Netherlands, records a learning loss of about 3%, with higher losses among students from less-educated homes.

However, one silver lining was the global acceptance of distance and online learning. It would have taken years of advocacy to achieve the overnight transition to remote learning. A recent study in the UK found that the majority of HE students rated the quality of online learning as excellent.

During this pandemic, we have seen a wide range of developments in higher education and lifelong learning.

One has been the phenomenal increase in MOOC enrolments, not just of global brands such as Coursera and FutureLearn, but also universities which had hesitated to offer online courses came forward to offer MOOCs especially for professional development. The COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery Initiative skilled and reskilled over 150,000 Commonwealth citizens in the last eighteen months.

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

Formal assessments and proctoring systems suffered major setbacks during the pandemic—where institutions adopted innovative approaches to build flexible models and make assessments more authentic. UNISA developed App-based assessments; Griffith University, Australia used oral assessments for the business programme and India introduced open book exams at scale.

Open Educational Resources were in high demand as teachers looked for quality digital content. A study conducted by OER Foundation and COL in May 2020 found that over 75% of the respondents expressed high demand for OER-based online courses.

The mobility of international students plummeted with travel restrictions and the closure of borders. This led to new partnerships and the increased importance of hybrid models and branch campuses providing an opportunity for students to experience 'internationalisation at home'.

Several institutions, particularly in Europe, came up with innovative solutions to help students—such as deferred payment of fees and provided financial support for at-risk students.

The recent Educause Horizon report sums up six new trends in higher education: the widening of the digital divide; increased use of hybrid learning; demand for new skills; a focus on sustainable development and a decrease in funding.

Respondents were also asked to pick the top technology trends and practices. The results were not surprising, with AI topping the list followed by blended course models, learning analytics, and micro

credentials. OER and quality online learning were also considered very important. What implications do these technologies and approaches have for the future of learning?

Futurist Wendell Bell identifies three types of future: preferable futures, probable futures and possible futures. Let us consider each of these.

First, the preferable future is one that points to a more desirable state. Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aspires to ensure equitable access to quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030 is the global community's preferable future. Six years down the line how close are we to this future? Trends indicate that even the slow progress achieved is likely to be further set back because of the pandemic.

SDG 4 aspires to leave no one behind. 15% of the world's population suffers from some form of disability, yet only a fraction have access to education at any level. Similarly, gender parity in education continues to elude us.

The 'learning crisis' is assuming massive proportions. The preferable future — which must be based on equity, inclusion, quality and lifelong learning for all — can only be achieved through alternative and innovative approaches.

Second, the probable future is what is more likely to happen based on current trends. Developments in technology will continue to drive changes in the way we teach and learn and technology adoption has been further accelerated due to the pandemic.

AI is being mainstreamed in education. Intelligent Tutoring Systems use AI techniques to simulate one-to-one human tutoring, provide timely feedback, all without the presence of a human teacher. Machine Learning helps to analyse and summarise the discussions in online courses so that a human tutor can guide the students towards fruitful collaboration. Are there opportunities for reaching persons with disabilities? A popular example of AI in education is a Virtual Teaching Assistant that can offer personalised assistance to learners.

Assessment has been a great challenge during the pandemic. AI-based assessments can constantly provide feedback to learners, teachers and parents about how the students learn, the support they need and the progress they are making towards their learning goals. In South Africa, mobile based assessments were used to reach those in the most remote shanties. The crisis is generating creative ways of assessment and evaluation.

The third is the possible future— something visionary that may or may not happen. The climate crisis is one of the defining issues of our times. Especially for small island states which are disproportionately affected by climate change. Over the past 40 years, the number of climate-related disasters globally has tripled, a trend that is expected to continue.

The education sector, from primary to tertiary, contributes to both direct and indirect emissions, with an impact on environmental degradation and associated economic costs. If we look strictly at contributions to emissions, the achievement of SDG4, under the current paradigm, could potentially worsen the climate crisis.

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. Can distance learning be an effective mitigation strategy?

In conclusion, let us look at some of our own policies and practices--what is the road ahead?

First, what kind of graduates are we developing? Are we producing lifelong learners who are employable in the changing job market? Do they have a positive mindset for working with others? Are they responsible global citizens?

Second, do we have an ethical institutional culture? Institutional culture will depend on leadership and the extent to which we can motivate and inspire our staff to inculcate values and deliver results. Institutional leaders must encourage a spirit of inquiry and a culture of research. How can this be done?

Third, are we developing innovators? In their book *The Innovators' DNA*, Dyer, et al identify innovation skills that can be learned: questioning, observing, networking and experimenting. How can we ensure that these skills are acquired and reinforced within an ethical framework?

The university management must develop enabling policies for mainstreaming distance and blended approaches while also investing in technology infrastructure and quality assurance. The quality of an institution was always measured by inputs, processes and outputs, with student pass rates at the centre. With rising youth unemployment, the employability of graduates will be a key indicator of quality. Management must also develop policies that specifically ensure that no one is left behind.

Universities need to rethink the curriculum to make it more integrated with the world of work within the context of our changing climate. Harnessing the potential of OER can be one way forward. More flexible and blended approaches can be implemented to address the needs of different constituencies. Creative ways of assessments and credentialling will be key. And research will provide the evidence of the efficiency and effectiveness of these approaches.

Both teachers and students will need support for making the transition to the new normal. Institutions will need to pay more attention to the well-being of their staff and students through expert counselling and guidance.

UNESCO's recent report on reimagining our futures together stresses the need for collaboration, the role of teachers and the principles of equity and inclusion. Pedagogy must move from emphasising individual achievement to accomplishment that benefits society; the curricula must be interdisciplinary and integrate ecological and intercultural dimensions. Teaching must become a collaborative endeavour; schools must be reimagined as safe spaces; and if we want to make a difference, we need to expand educational opportunities everywhere and for everyone. This is a valuable blueprint for higher education for the future.

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