

Reforming Open Universities: An International Perspective



16 November 2019

40th Anniversary Celebration
Zhejiang Open University, Zhejiang, China

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Distinguished Delegates, let me begin by congratulating Zhejiang Radio and TV University on its 40th anniversary. It is a historic occasion and I'm very grateful to the organisers for inviting me to be a part of it. Zhejiang Radio and TV University has much to celebrate as it has been a pioneer of open and distance learning (ODL) in China and has graduated over 850,000 students in the last four decades. I would like to wish the university every success as it embarks on its fifth decade.

My topic today is 'Reforming Open Universities: an international perspective' and I have prepared this presentation with my colleague Dr Tony Mays.

In this presentation I will first look at four drivers of reform and the implications these have for open universities. I will then highlight some areas that we need to focus on to make ourselves relevant to the needs of our learners. I will conclude by looking at the road ahead and what we can do to be effective institutions in the 21st century.

Our world is changing rapidly and there are many factors indicating the need for reform. We will explore four: migration and displacement; technology; changing workplaces; and climate crises.

For a host of reasons, people are on the move. This includes refugees and those who are displaced by war or conflict. Today one out of 108 people is displaced. In addition, there is a movement of students across national boundaries.

China is part of this migration of students. China is not only sending large numbers of students abroad but is also receiving international students from different parts of the world. Last year, nearly half a million international students from 196 countries studied in China. South Korea ranked first in the number of students followed by Thailand, Pakistan, India and the United States. Open Universities should be geared towards accommodating the diverse needs of such students. But how flexible are we about whom we enroll, how we teach and how we accredit?

The second driver of change is technology. Increasingly sophisticated AI and robotics make it possible to automate not only routine tasks but also increasingly high-level interaction. How well are Open

Universities using technology not only to prepare students but also to teach, assess and support them better?

We talk about the fourth industrial revolution. What has been the impact of these revolutions on higher education? In the first industrial revolution when the steam engine was invented, higher education made a transition from being elite to one which anyone could aspire to. The second industrial revolution was marked by the assembly line and mass production, when it became possible to produce self-instructional booklets and offer correspondence courses. The rise of the computer and internet in the third revolution led to the rise of open universities and today in the fourth revolution marked by AI and Robotics, we have MOOCs and OER.

The third driver is the changing nature of work. We need workers who can learn and adapt throughout their lives, and be able to take on different work, with different people, at different times and in different ways. How should an open university respond? Traditional degrees might not be the answer.

As research tells us that 65% of the children entering primary school today will work in jobs that do not yet exist. Simply reforming current education systems to meet future skills requirements is not going to be enough. Ageing countries will need wholesale reskilling of existing workforces throughout their life. How can open universities prepare our learners for an uncertain future?

The fourth driver of change is the climate crisis. Climate change is no longer a distant threat and no country today is exempt from the impact of climate change—rising temperatures, floods, droughts and cyclones are impacting everyone.

Every year nearly 40 million children have their education disrupted by natural disasters or disease. When cyclone Idai hit Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe this March, 600 schools were damaged with an adverse impact on hundreds of thousands of children. Another cyclone devastated entire education systems in the Bahamas recently.

The changing context presents new challenges for open universities. We need to be prepared for the growing mobility of our graduates. New demands are resulting in new models of educational delivery and more competition. There is an increasing need for producing graduates who are employable. A new concern is how to reduce the carbon footprint of education—COL carried out a study where it found that the carbon footprint of Botswana Open University was one third that of the campus university—how can open universities take the lead in environmental conservation?

How are the open universities in different parts of the world responding to these challenges?

The strategic plan of Athabasca University, Canada is entitled ‘Imagine: Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities’ and positions the institution as ‘open, flexible and everywhere’. In order to meet this promise, it has adopted agile course development using OER, data informed student services and a digital strategy that helps them to reach the remotest learners.

Keeping pace with the changing times, the Open University, UK has extended its global footprint through Future Learn, its MOOC platform. It uses multiple media channels such as iTunes and You Tube to improve student support systems.

UNISA is becoming increasingly paperless by using OER, ebooks, etutors and ementors. It ensures that every student has access to a PC or tablet and the internet.

The Open University of China has also transformed itself and leads a ‘credit bank’ and ‘six-network integration’ for learner development, developing online courses, building personalized learner support systems and facilitating examination reform.

Each model demonstrates a response to the needs of a particular context at a particular time. However, all models have five elements in common. These are content, delivery, recognition, flexibility and openness. Instead of developing courses from scratch, some institutions are using existing OER. Technology is being used to personalize learning through various delivery options. Some of these universities are going beyond formal credentials to recognize prior learning. The emphasis is on flexibility and on becoming truly open.

As more campus universities move into the online space, open universities have begun to lose some of their competitive edge. We believe the changes in the external environment signal the need for reform in three key areas: curriculum; teaching learning and assessment; and openness and flexibility.

How can open universities reform the curriculum to be more relevant to the needs of our times?

In a study in the US, 36% of college graduates did not show any significant cognitive gains over four years of college. Half the employers surveyed, said that they had trouble finding qualified graduates to hire.

A McKinsey report points out that ‘employers, education providers and youth live in parallel universes’ and very often these worlds do not meet. Over 50% of the youth surveyed did not believe that their secondary education would lead to employment. Similarly about 50% of the employers did not think that the new graduates had the skills to be hired even at the entry level. There seems to be a disconnect between what we teach in our schools and universities and what is required by the job market.

What is it that employers want? As a report points out that employers are concerned about non-cognitive skills just as they are about cognitive and technical skills. These relate to communications, teamwork, leadership, entrepreneurship etc.

Geoff Colvin’s book *Humans are Underrated* says that the high achievers in the 21st century will be ‘relationship workers’ as opposed to the ‘knowledge workers’ of the 20th century. Robots will perform most tasks better than human beings but it is humans who have social skills and empathy, can solve complex problems and are creative. How do we nurture such skills among our learners? Can technology help?

Let us now review emerging trends in technology which relate mainly to Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality. What are the implications for open universities? Some examples will suggest future directions.

An IBM report cites one example of the Intelligent Tutoring System. These systems use AI techniques to simulate one-to-one human tutoring. They are able to provide timely feedback, all without the presence of a human teacher. AI, in particular, Machine Learning, helps to analyse and summarise the discussions in online courses so that a human tutor can guide the students towards fruitful collaboration. AI-enabled systems can group students with similar interests at a similar cognitive level.

The Open University of Malaysia has developed chatbots to provide personalised tutoring facilities to its learners for its course on ‘Object Oriented Programming’.

Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality technologies have great potential to improve learner experience. VR can immerse the learner in a simulated experience while AR can alter one’s current perception of the

real-world environment through visuals or sound. Both AR and VR have a major presence in the mobile world. The leadership in these technologies is entirely with commercial systems and costs continue to be high. Some institutions have established labs for students to experience AR/VR. However, these are so far available in well-resourced urban centres—what about learners in remote rural areas?

Since there is more emphasis on learning outcomes, we need to invest more in learner support and technology can help us to a large extent. 24/7 online hubs and call centres can prove to be very helpful, if they are run effectively. Learning analytics have helped to provide personalised learning and improvement in learning outcomes in many institutions. But as we increase our use of technology, we need to keep the human touch.

Assessment has been a challenge for many teachers. According to Professor Rose Luckin at the University College London, “stop and test” assessments do not rigorously evaluate a student’s understanding of a topic. AI-based assessment constantly provides 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. Micro-credentials are leading to unbundling of long courses and programmes into shorter, just-in-time courses that can be taken at one’s own pace or time. The credentials can also be transferred from one institution to another. Since we are no longer testing only knowledge but also skills and competencies, we need new ways of assessing performance.

Blockchain, a major development in the area of financial technology, is, in effect, an open source online register that is maintained cooperatively. The student acquires the profile, institutions add credit and status information, accreditors determine qualifications, while the employer can verify the credentials. Blockchain will challenge paper credentials and paper certificates that are the norm today. The verification process will be possible online and this would deal a blow to digital diploma mills. Instead of the manual authentication of portfolios, institutions will be able to carry out this process online.

Today we have a vast resource of open content or OER that we can adopt or adapt according to our needs. More than 900 universities in the world are offering MOOCs—how many of these are open universities?

Major MOOC initiatives have been taken in China, India, Japan and other Asian countries where thousands of courses are available in Asian languages.

Similarly, Asia has implemented several successful OER initiatives. The China Open Resources in Education, the National Repository on OER in India, the Open Courseware initiatives in Pakistan and Japan all promote the development and sharing of open content to improve the quality of education in their countries. Many of the materials are also available in national languages.

But in spite of these various initiatives, we have not seen a mass movement in the uptake of OER. For example, what are the barriers that Chinese teachers face? A study shows that these are: lack of time, inadequate capacity in how to develop OER and no incentives.

What does research tell us about the learners’ perspective? A global survey of research shows that reduced cost was the most important reason for the use of OER by students. This was followed by considerations of flexibility in terms of time and ease of access. In the same survey, students reported that the use of OER led to increased interest in the subjects taught, more satisfaction with the learning experience and higher motivation for further studies. Are open universities taking advantage of OER?

It is clear that we need to review our policies and practices. The focus should be on developing the skills and competencies of our learners. They will demand greater flexibility and move back and forth from

academia to employment. Micro-credentials will be as important as degrees. The faculty will have to become lifelong learners to keep pace with these changes.

What is the road ahead? How should we work now?

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

What kind of institutional culture do we have? Institutional culture will depend on leadership and the extent to which we can motivate and inspire our staff to deliver results. New technologies can provide data for informed decision-making. ODL leaders must encourage a spirit of inquiry and a culture of research. How can this be done?

In their book *The Innovators' DNA*, Dyer, Gregerson and Christensen identify innovation skills that can be learned: questioning, observing, networking and experimenting. Leaders can ensure that they create a culture where these skills can be acquired and reinforced.

Second, address the issue of employability for our youth. Youth unemployment is high in many of our countries. We will need to prepare our youth for livelihoods—employment and entrepreneurship. This will require a curriculum that addresses the needs of industry and society.

Third, re-focus on lifelong learning. From the very beginning, open distance and elearning has catered to the needs of lifelong learners through its flexible and learner-centric approaches. Lifelong learning includes the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning. As countries need to skill and reskill their workforce, ODL can be a cost-effective option for training and re-training our learners.

Whatever model we adopt, let us ensure that our graduates have the three literacies that will prepare them for the future. First, the human literacy, prepares students to perform jobs that only human beings can do. Human literacy will help them to make ethical choices, equip them for social engagement through effective communication. Second, data literacy is essential in a world driven by data. Learners must be able to find meaning in the flood of information around us. Third, technological literacy is essential if we are to understand machines and their uses. Learners must be able to deploy software and hardware in order to maximize their powers to achieve and create. If we can equip our learners with these three literacies, we will be preparing them for the brave new world that awaits.

My organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning develops some of the best resources in open distance and technology enabled learning which can help open universities to reform and re-invent themselves. These are available as OER and you can use, re-use and translate them just as the Open University of China has done. If you need resources, COL's publications are freely available on our website and can support OUs as they continually re-invent themselves.

With that, let me thank you for your attention.