

Realigning open and distance learning: The quest for employability in a digitally divided world



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Introduction

It is a privilege to do this presentation at the International LET-IN 2023 Conference with the very appropriate theme of Learning & Teaching Innovations. Thank you Professor Dr. Meltem Huri Baturay and the conference organising committee for the kind invitation to be part of this conference.

Problem statement

Within a context where education and the job market being impacted by technological advances such as generative artificial intelligence (AI), higher education institutions need to consider how they prepare students and what their position would be in terms of the wider employability discourse. While there are also questions asked about the relevance of courses and programmes made available by universities and other higher education as well as the increasing cost of qualifications, it has become essential to consider the role and the nature of universities. In this context, *employability* relates to the ability of individuals to obtain and maintain employment throughout their working career (Römgens, Scoupe & Beausaert, 2020).

The increased focus on jobs and commercialisation of higher education has been a response to addressing these external challenges. Conversely, it remains an open question whether this is indeed the main purpose of higher education and specifically what the implications would be for open and distance learning (ODL).

This paper explores employability in a digitally divided world towards realigning ODL in terms of specific interventions by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL).

Contextualisation of employability for open and distance learning

According to the International Labour Organization's (2022) *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2022: Investing in transforming futures for young people*, great losses were experienced in terms of graduate employment during the COVID-19 pandemic for those aged between 15 and 24. Furthermore, the rise in youth unemployment by around 4 million in 2020 is only part of wider trend of global unemployment. This report notes how graduates are underprepared for employment and expresses the need for longer-term transformative policies and approaches. The report also showed a disparity in terms of graduate unemployment and gender; with men at 16% and women at 31% in terms of unemployment globally. Similarly, statistics from the United Nations (UN, 2023) has shown that young women face a likelihood of being out of education, employment, or training that is more than double that of young men.

Within this context it is important to consider which contextual factors influence employability for ODL in a digitally divided world. In this regard, there are changing requirements in the very dynamic labour market. In some instances, student attendance within the higher education sector also plays a role. The potential impact of generative artificial intelligence on education and the workplace is evident. There are also many considerations in terms of convenience and flexibility on the side of students when it comes to the learning milieu. Finally, also on the side of students, cost and value for money are highly relevant as in many contexts higher education is still a very expensive and often exclusive endeavour.

As this paper relates to employability within the context of ODL, it is essential to determine what ODL and openness implies. To this end, it is relevant to consider openness within the perspective of how it was envisaged by Lord Crowther (1969) at the presentation of the charter for The Open University in the United Kingdom. Here it was declared by Lord Crowther (1969) that the university would be “open, first, as to people”, “open as to places”, “open as to methods” and “open, finally, to ideas”. From this speech, the accessible and flexible nature of open education is unmistakable. Firstly, within ODL the aim is to be inclusive and open up opportunities for people from different contexts and even those who might not have the opportunity to access higher education through more traditional avenues. Furthermore, for ODL the implication is that learning extends beyond the physical boundaries of a campus and that learning can take place at any place and time. Furthermore, an openness to various teaching and learning methods and techniques are implied using different communication technologies. Finally, also an openness to different ideas is envisaged which may imply a more inclusive epistemological approach to education.

Employability and the Commonwealth of Learning's approach

This paper specifically considers employability in terms of the specific employability interventions that have been conducted by COL over past number of years. However, some contextualisation might be necessary. COL is an intergovernmental organisation which, according to the *Memorandum of Understanding on the Commonwealth of Learning* (Commonwealth Governments, 2014), aims to: “create and widen access to opportunities for learning, by promoting co-operation between universities, colleges and other educational institutions throughout the Commonwealth, making use of the potential offered by distance education and by the application of communication technologies to education” (p. 2). This mandate emphasises COL's focus on ODL and opening access to quality education.

Furthermore, with regard to employability and the activities reflected upon in this paper, it is necessary to consider COL's Strategic Plan 2021-2027. In this document (COL, 2021), the focus of the Higher Education initiative at COL is formulated as follows:

COL will work with policy makers and practitioners to focus on the quality of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. COL will:

- *Provide support for national and institutional ODL policies, quality assurance systems and authentic assessment practices (LTO2)*
- *Promote the rapid design, development and delivery of quality gender-responsive OER (LTO2&3)*
- *Assist in the development and implementation of employability frameworks (LTO2&3). (p. 13)*

In this regard, the last aim is pertinent as the initiative is tasked to specifically support institutions to develop and implement employability frameworks. Many existing employability interventions supported by COL are based on COL's Employability Model (cf. Mohee, 2019). COL has published three publications on employability recently: *Integrating Employability in Higher Education Institutions: An Introduction to the Commonwealth of Learning's Employability Model for Prospective Partners* as well as *A Guide to Integrating Employability in Higher Education Institutions: The Commonwealth of Learning's Employability Model* in 2019 as well as the *Toolkit for Key Employability Indicators for National Qualification Agencies* in 2020.

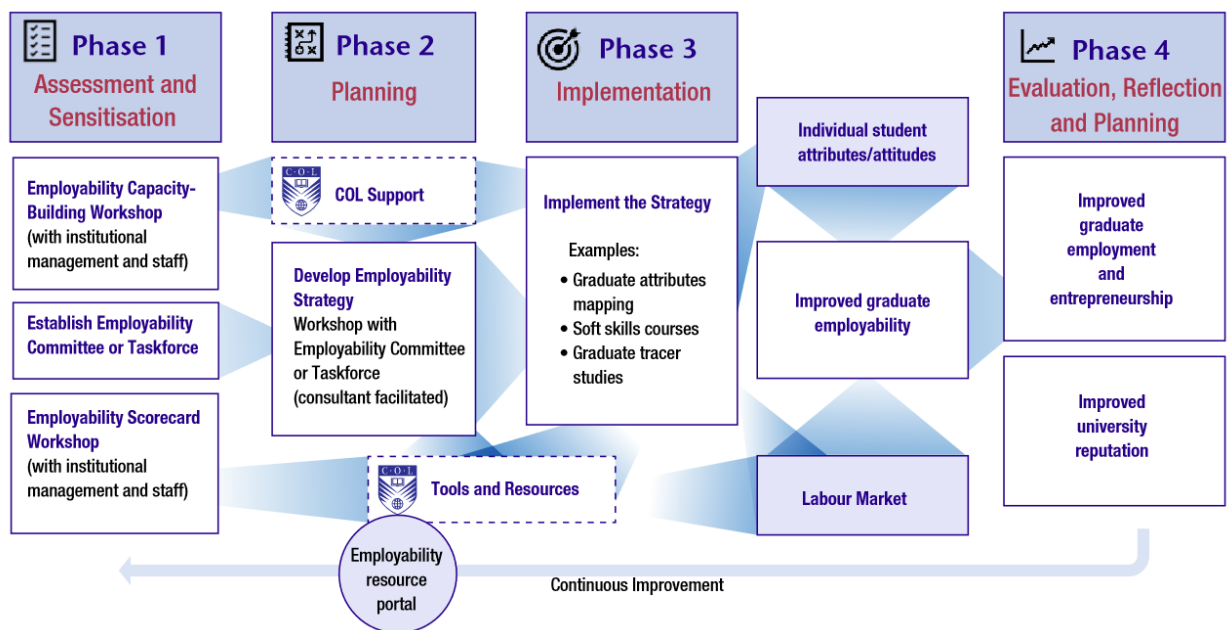
It is necessary to unpack the concept of employability further. For Yorke (2006) employability as “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (p. 8). From this definition, it is evident that specific skills, knowledge and predispositions on the side of graduates determine or at least influence employability. Yorke (2006) admits that many variables play a role and that

having the desired characteristics may not imply employability necessarily. Importantly, this definition not only emphasises gaining employment, but also being successful in specific occupations.

Various interpretations are associated with employability and based on the review of a number of key sources, Römgens *et al.* (2020) identified six dimensions of employability research in higher education: applying disciplinary knowledge, transferable generic skills, emotional regulation, career development skills, self-management and self-efficacy. The authors also identified some differences between higher education and workplace learning, but also showed strong overlap with the majority of constructs.

Employability Model and typical intervention process

Addressing employability within the higher education sector is driven by many reasons. Among this is the fact that universities may want to show the value of the education they offer, be responsive to the needs of the job market, and foster students who are adaptable and ready for a changing world of work. To this end, through the use of COL's Employability Model consultants collaboratively construct employability solutions and ultimately processes for institutions based on their own unique contexts and needs. A typical process for the Employability Model can look as follows, but may be adapted based on the institution:



COL Employability Model (Mohee, 2019, p. 10)

This process involves facilitating some sensitization and assessment at management level in order to build capacity, establish relevant institution-specific structures and then assess the nature of the needs and level of employability based on the COL Employability Scorecard (cf. Mohee, 2019). In some cases, in addition to the employability scorecard a wider needs assessment is undertaken by consultants based on the research brief compiled by the institution in collaboration with COL. The Employability Scorecard broadly covers the following categories (Mohee, 2019):

- Awareness of graduate employment status
- Career-path development
- Promoting employability in the curriculum
- Relationships with employers
- Working experience
- Supporting learners to develop their careers
- Extracurricular activity (p. 43)

The process of assessment is followed by the development of an employability strategy for the institution. This may also involve the drafting of a specific policy or implementation strategy. Despite the support by COL and the facilitation by a consultant, it is essential that institutions take ownership of this process as such, as strategies should have sufficient inputs and buy-in from partner institutions and different stakeholders at institutions. It is even at this level where the community, labour market and alumni can also play important roles.

The next phase involves implementing the employability strategy. Depending on what an institution has planned, this may involve mapping of graduate attributes that may be relevant to the institution, creating dedicated courses around identified soft skills or even graduate tracer studies. It is anticipated that through such process and course enhancement steps, student attributes and attitudes can be influenced positively and that in turn lead to improved graduate employability. A number of skills and attributes are associated with employability, and this includes the following listed by Mohee (2019):

- Communication Skills
- Ability to Learn
- Specialised or Discipline-Specific Knowledge
- Self-Motivation
- Resilience and Growth Mindset
- Diverse Experiences
- Numeracy

- Transferability of Skills
- Interdisciplinary Thinking
- Ability to Work Under Pressure
- Willingness to Try New Things
- Technical Skills
- Adaptability
- Interpersonal Skills
- Ability to Value Diversity and Difference
- Ability to Articulate Knowledge and Skills
- Systems Thinking
- Teamwork (p. 7)

The final phase involves evaluating the level of graduate employability as well as an institution's profile in terms of the Employability Scorecard. At this point, institutions take full ownership of the process and further additional cycles of strategy and course enhancement can be done.

Reflections and lessons learnt

For this paper, the experiences from employability interventions from eleven higher education institutions were considered. The map (Figure 1) below shows the countries where the institutions are located.



Figure 1: Map showing the Commonwealth and identifying countries from which institutions were included in this research

This paper involved inductive qualitative content analysis of concept notes, workshop feedback and consultant and institutional reports. The sample included eleven higher educational institutions supported by COL in terms of employability and it covered over 20 workshops and institution-based interventions.

From the analysis the following broad trends were identified:

- There seems to be inadequate or in some cases no buy-in from management and even some lecturers and other staff at institutions. This emphasises the need for an open and inclusive process from the start through which all stakeholders are sufficiently identified and invited to be involved in the process.
- Institutions have indicated that they have limited time and funds for course enhancement support for lecturers. Where possible, COL has supported such work, but it seems that more investment may be necessary in this regard on the part of institutions. Course creation and renewal is part of the teaching and learning process in higher education and as such employability aspects should not be seen as an add-on, but rather be integrated into existing processes.
- Issues around lecturer subject and employability knowledge were also raised. As part of the higher education institutions' process of professional development both subject and employability knowledge can be expanded. In many of the COL interventions, staff capacity building for employability was done, but it seems that more institution-driven training opportunities and perhaps incentives from institutions may be necessary.
- Furthermore, bureaucracy around policy approval was also noted as a big concern. On the one hand it is essential for processes to be streamlined, but on the other, approval processes may take long as it involves steps related to legal approval and obtaining wider inputs and ultimately endorsement from different levels of the institution.
- Employability skills are sometimes limited to a single subject or to the mandate of a single department. In this regard, a more integrated approach is recommended, but in reality, it may depend on the needs and capacity on the side of institutions. However, considerations around graduate employability concerns the whole student population and despite good practices in some departments, a wider approach might be necessary.
- The digital literacy and ODL skills of lecturers is also a point of concern. In many instances, consultants indicate that lecturer digital literacy and ODL skills, that are expected to be in place, may not be sufficient and hence lead to disruptions and delays in activities such as course enhancement. Consequently, it may be necessary for institutions to include the development of digital literacy and ODL skills towards their planning for any employability enhancement interventions.

- Finally, in some instances technical challenges were also observed in terms of the availability of appropriate resources and technologies. This is a very context-specific issue, but may have significant implications for any graduate employability interventions within the ODL context.

Apart from these common issues that have emerged from the work done at a number of higher education institutions, some practical recommendations can also be made:

- Localised institutional solutions are required for local graduate employability challenges. This implies not only understanding the context nationally and institutionally but also closely collaborating with all relevant stakeholders. This in turn implies carefully determining who the stakeholders would be and also determining at which point who would be beneficial to the process.
- Staff should be capacitated in appropriate digital literacy and ODL skills. This implies a needs assessment of the requirements of staff in terms of their digital literacy and ODL skills as well as a carefully planned ongoing process of professional development.
- At classroom level, assessments should be more authentic and should also relate to what could be expected in the workplace. In order to make the link between higher education and the world of work, authentic assessment tasks offer interesting opportunities. In this regard, COL often provides support at institutions not only in terms of employability but also authentic assessment for ODL.
- Holistic institution-wide approaches rather than isolated interventions or separate add-on subjects are needed. With a holistic and inclusive approach, an institution rather than a specific department or section takes responsibility for graduate employability.
- Overall, graduate employability skills should be a matter of both policy and practice. Hence, interventions should not only cover drafting of policies and/or implementation frameworks, but should ultimately lead to teaching and learning practices that foster graduate employability among students.

In conclusion, as the world is changing in terms of jobs and the role of AI, so should universities prepare students to be flexible and resilient. Universities need to be supported in order to have sufficient policies and implementation frameworks in place. Staff development in terms of employability and especially supporting skills, such as digital skills, are essential. Any such interventions should build and be embedded in existing work experience, experiential or work-integrate learning activities. However, it is clear that for many higher education institutions we are still living in a digitally divided world and in towards addressing graduate employability challenges for ODL, contextualised and data-driven realignment may be necessary.

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