

Building Resilient Education Systems



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The education of over 90 per cent of the world's student population was disrupted due to COVID-19. No one was prepared for the unprecedented crisis or the immediate response that would be required. Distance and online learning became the only means for institutions to keep the doors of learning open. For most, this was an entirely new experience and uncharted territory. Years of advocacy would not have caused the world to adopt distance learning, as it was obliged to do almost overnight. How can we use this acceptance as an opportunity to build resilient education systems?

As you know, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) works in 54 member states that span all regions of the globe. What kind of support did countries require during the pandemic? First, there was the need for quality content, especially at the school level, which has the greatest number of displaced learners. Second, there was an urgent need for teacher training in distance and online education. Third, institutions required support to leverage a range of technologies for distance learning, including print, radio, TV, and online, so that even the most remote communities can access learning. Fourth, with the continued lockdowns, there was a need for alternative assessment and examination systems. Lastly, countries required enhancements to their digital infrastructure to provide an enabling environment for effective distance and online provision.

COL responded swiftly using a multi-pronged approach—providing guidelines and instruments, building the capacity of teachers, tailoring specific responses to requests from Member States and promoting collaboration and resource-sharing. In partnership with the OER Foundation and ICDE, COL launched OER4COVID, and the participants surveyed from 89 countries stressed the need for curating content linked to their national curricula rather than simply providing access to repositories. COL responded by creating a video-on-demand service in STEM subjects aligned to the curriculum in Fiji, Nauru and Samoa. COL offered a MOOC on 'Using OER for online teaching' in partnership with the ministry of education, Trinidad and Tobago which trained over 8,000 teachers in the country. During the pandemic, COL provided support to campus institutions in Nigeria to go dual mode and higher education institutions in Antigua & Barbuda, Kenya and Malaysia to integrate technology enabled learning. A university in Zambia requested support for integrating employability into the curriculum and the University of Rwanda is developing online security and privacy policies. These few examples give you an idea of what institutions are prioritising as a result of the pandemic.

Lack of access to the Internet has been a major issue at this time, further disadvantaging those from low-income groups. Throughout its history, distance education has been leveraged to address inequities. UNESCO estimates that 11 million girls are likely to drop out of schools. Open schools are flexible and cost-effective, making them a viable option for girls. Another constituency that is in danger of being further marginalised during the crisis are persons with disabilities (PWD). Even in normal circumstances,

the participation of PWD in higher education has been low, especially in developing countries. Research shows that PWD prefer ODL because of the flexibility, convenience and degree of anonymity that it provides. As the ODL community, we need to take a more proactive approach to ensure that both women and girls and PWD are not further marginalised in a post pandemic world.

From the current crisis we have seen that countries with strong and robust existing distance education systems have been able to maintain continuity much more successfully than those without these systems in place. India, which has a thriving system of open universities, a National Institute of Open Schooling with sites throughout the country, a robust, national online learning platform, and a wide range of radio and TV content, is an example of a resilient ecosystem which can deal with current and future crises. When the pandemic struck, the open schools in Botswana and Namibia responded immediately by sharing their resources so that all learners in their countries could access quality learning materials. By having strong systems in place before disaster strikes, these countries have maintained the continuity of learning during the crisis.

However, these systems have required thoughtful and systematic planning. Many of the concerns about quality and access during the current pandemic are largely due to the fact that countries have not had the time to plan the roll out of distance education. Pandemics, climate change, and social/political unrest are realities that we will continue to face in the future. How can governments begin to build education systems that not only respond to disaster but are resilient to it?

Governments have an important role to play in the sustainable and systematic integration of distance education into national systems. Countries must develop appropriate national ODL and OER policies/frameworks, as well as national ICT and connectivity strategies to overcome access barriers. Inclusive policies, focusing on PWD, should be implemented to ensure no one is left behind. Institutions must boost investments in technology infrastructure and develop online learning platforms that cater to large numbers of learners and support a range of affordable and appropriate technologies. Institutions must also encourage cooperation to avoid duplication of efforts and enhance impact.

The current challenge of COVID-19 has provided us with an opportunity to rethink our approach to education. It is time to build resilient education ecosystems so that they can both survive and be prepared for future crises. The distance learning community has a leadership role to play.

First, we need to look beyond the current crisis and build the capacity of institutions in all aspects of distance and online provision. The future of learning will be blended, and one contribution can be advocacy, based on rigorous research.

Second, the high rates of unemployment among the youth and the changing nature of jobs requires constant skilling and re-skilling. How can we work with industry, employers and training providers to offer short courses for employment and entrepreneurship?

Third, we have seen a mass uptake of self-directed learning during the pandemic and this becomes an important opportunity to promote lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is central to the mission of many open universities, and we can play a leadership role in demonstrating how this can be effectively implemented.

The pandemic has been a second coming for distance and online learning which has moved from margin to mainstream. We have much to contribute. Resilient systems will enable us to face the brave new world with confidence.