Leadership and Innovation for the Future of ODL

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It is a pleasure to be here for the second High Level Roundtable of Vice Chancellors of Open Universities and dual mode institutions in the Commonwealth.

The first Roundtable was held two years ago when some of you were able to join us from 19 countries around the world.

We are very grateful to Dato Ansary for hosting the Roundtable then and for being our gracious host this time as well. Thank you, Dato, Sufian and your team.

The last time, we discussed three key areas of interest to all of us: leadership, quality and developments in technology. The session on sharing best practice was really an eye-opener where we discovered many innovations that each VC had initiated to address issues of access, equity, costs and quality. While we will touch on all these themes, our focus this time will be on Leadership for the future of ODL.

Two years ago, you identified the major challenges that you faced in your leadership roles: lack of autonomy, inadequate policy frameworks and declining funding. Another concern was resistance to change from your staff and increasing competition from a diversity of providers.

VCs agreed to gather and share data relating to student outcomes and employment; forge linkages with the corporate sector for employment opportunities for graduates; learn from other institutions and manage change within their institutions by continuous engagement with staff.

In this presentation, I will begin by proposing that ODL has been a major disruption in higher education. I will then reflect on the kinds of leadership we need for the future of ODL. We will then examine the link between leadership and innovation and finally, I will draw upon my own experiences to suggest the possible way forward.

Let us first look at ODL as a disruptive innovation.

Clayton Christensen defines disruptive innovation in business as a process whereby a smaller entity with fewer resources is able to successfully challenge established players and displace incumbent businesses by addressing a specific need that had hitherto not been addressed.

What are the characteristics of disruption? First, it is a process not a product or service which is usually regarded as having lower quality in the beginning. It takes time to challenge and disrupt established businesses or organisations. New models emerge as a result. But we must also remember that all disruptions do not succeed.

This diagram shows how disruptions take place in business. The new product enters the market at the bottom to satisfy the needs of low-end customers. This need is not being addressed by the existing dominant players in the market. The new entrants improve their performance and quality over a period of time and eventually dislodge the dominance of the big players.

Using Christensen's disruptive innovation model in higher education, we find open and distance learning (ODL) as the real innovation at the bottom of the pyramid that continues to challenge the mainstream face-to-face higher education. The campus institutions have become mainstream over 900 years of existence and the state, students and parents continue to sustain the demand for them. However, ODL began to cater to those who were left outside mainstream higher education.

ODL as an innovation is now manifesting itself as online and blended learning. This is when the boundaries begin to blur between campus and ODL institutions. According to the Distance Education Enrolment Report 2017, about 30% students in higher education in the USA are taking at least one distance education course. MOOC, another form of distance education has been embraced by the top-tier universities. This shows that ODL, the initial disruptor is being mainstreamed.

We speak of the fourth industrial revolution today—what has been the impact of these revolutions on disruptive innovations in 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 and distance learning and open universities and today in the fourth revolution marked by AI and Robotics, we have OER, MOOCs, chatbots, micro-credentials.

ODL was seen as a second chance second choice option in higher education meant for those who had neither access nor opportunity for campus-based education. It served a specific need in society and harnessed technologies to reach the unreached with flexible learning options. As its quality and relevance was established, its methods began to be adopted by campus institutions giving rise to blended, flexible and online learning.

Disruptions emerge when mainstream providers fail to cater to the needs of a learning society. These are supported by innovations in technology and give rise to a new breed of providers. As we have seen, distance and online learning have grown and evolved over the last fifty years, keeping pace with and taking advantage of the various technologies. While initially ODL institutions were at the forefront of innovations, they have not played a leadership role in either the OER movement or in developing MOOCs. They have yet to adopt and appropriate these emerging options. Why did we lose our leadership? Dedicated distance education institutions have encountered challenges in recent times in terms of funding and student numbers.

What kind of leadership would we need to steer ODL into the future?

Bolman and Deal identify four frames of leadership in their book 'Reframing Organizations'. Let us look at some examples of ODL leaders within these frames.

Most leaders operate within the structural frame. This involves setting goals, identifying the steps needed to reach the goal and delivering results. As the costs of HE increase, and the demand grows, there is a greater call for accountability.

For example, Prof Rajesh Chandra, the VC of the University of the South Pacific is accountable to the 12 countries that are part of this regional university. In consultation with his diverse stakeholders, he has developed a strategic plan with key performance indicators and clear timelines.

The second frame focuses on human resources. Here the leader recognises that people are an important resource and explores the implications of each decision and how it will impact staff. The leader thinks it is important to get staff input and to build consensus and get the buy-in of staff.

Prof Ram Reddy the first VC of IGNOU understood the need for recruiting the right people and then investing in their training and retraining. Through personal example, he motivated and inspired staff to believe that they were all part of a greater mission to provide quality education to the hitherto unreached constituencies in India.

Leaders also operate within the political frame and understand that managing conflict, creating coalitions and networks is part of their job. Their concern is to secure the resources required to meet goals. They must be aware of their power base and how can it be improved.

In 2005, two open universities in Canada merged with campus-based institutions. The Tele University de Quebec merged with the University of Montreal and the BC Open University combined with the University College of the Cariboo to become Thompsons Rivers University.

COL Commissioned a study to understand why this had happened. Some clear lessons emerged. Leaders must continue to engage closely with governments, build relationships with other institutions and cultivate communities of students and alumni.

The fourth, the symbolic frame focuses on values and what the institution stands for. Leaders create symbols to capture attention, communicate their vision and mission and build their brand.

Prof Olu Jegede the founding VC of the National Open University of Nigeria developed the slogan 'Work and Learn' and you could see this painted on the back of most tuktuks and public transport in Lagos. To further consolidate this message, he persuaded the sitting President of the country HE Olusegun Obasanjo, to combine learning with his day job and join the diploma course in theology. You'll be pleased to note that President Obasanjo completed his PhD this year.

Do ODL leaders combine all these frames? Will a combination of these frames lead to innovative leadership?

What is the link between innovation and leadership?

Innovative leadership brings fresh and creative thinking to leadership tasks. Leadership for innovation means creating an institutional culture where innovative thinking flourishes. And leaders for the future of ODL need to combine both.

Let us take the case of one of the most innovative leaders of our times, Steve Jobs. In an article in Forbes magazine, Gallo identifies the seven strategies that made him so successful. A passion for what he did, the desire to make a difference, to sell dreams not products and to master and communicate the message. If you look closely, he combines all the four frames that we referred to: the structural, human resource; political and the symbolic.

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.

Asking simple questions can often lead to profound discoveries. ODL leaders must encourage a spirit of enquiry and create a culture of research.

Observing closely is a skill that all innovators share—ODL leaders must enable their staff to visit other institutions, attend conferences and expose them to emerging developments in technology.

Innovators are great networkers—ODL leaders must promote interdisciplinary exchanges so that by connecting different disciplines and sectors, innovative ideas emerge.

And finally, innovators are always trying out new experiences and solutions.

What can we learn from the industry? In this study carried out to determine what factors contribute to research and innovation in industry, managers believed that this is driven primarily by the corporate culture of an organization. How do we define this enabling corporate culture? This means staff have autonomy and freedom, there is a system of recognition and rewards in place and a culture where failure is not a stigma but is accepted as a lesson learned. The junior staff had a slightly different perspective on what drives research and innovation. They believed that research and innovation depended largely on the right people. So we find that it is the people and the institutional culture that are critical to driving innovation.

Finally, what is the way forward?

I believe that leaders who will shape the future of ODL will need to invest in the three Ps: philosophy, people and processes.

Let us take philosophy first. The founding chancellor of the Open University of the UK, Lord Crowther defined openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas. This formed the basis of what we mean by opening up education and inspired the establishment of open universities around the world.

This founding philosophy continued to inspire future leaders within the OU. Sir John Daniel's evolutionary approach to the integration of technology resulted in more online courses and more student enrolments during his tenure as VC. As VC, he also enrolled as a student in his own university to experience the learning process at first hand. His later successor Martin Bean launched FutureLearn, making the OU, the first open university to become more open by offering a MOOC.

As we move into the uncertain future, ODL leaders must believe in the social mission of their institutions and keep abreast of developments in technologies. How can we become more effective advocates for ODL as we need to continually convince policy makers and stakeholders about the efficiency and effectiveness of this mode?

ODL leaders must not only motivate and inspire staff but also provide incentives, where appropriate.

Let us take the example of Prof Tian Belawati, the former rector of the Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia. When UT initiated online learning in 1997, there was a great deal of resistance. The university leadership identified a group of champions to develop an experimental research proposal on online tutorials. Funding was provided and support came from the highest levels. This led to the wider acceptance and integration of the initiative.

Since we can't do everything ourselves, how can we cultivate champions for change?

Leaders must also develop the policies and processes that foster innovation. There must be an environment for healthy discussion and debate and a targeted approach to addressing specific issues.

Let us take the example of the Open University of Japan. As government funding declines and the age of students increases, with one fourth of the students over 60, the former President reconsidered the nature of the course offerings. An aging population in many countries will make it necessary for us to cater to the needs of the third age and reorient our plans and processes to deal with emerging realities.

How can leaders ensure that their institutions keep evolving to remain relevant to the needs of stakeholders?

With that, let me thank you for your attention.