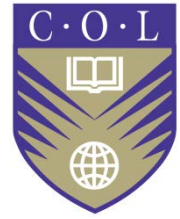


Widening Access to Education in the Commonwealth: what have we learned?



Presentation Transcript

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*Presented by
Professor Asha Kanwar, President & CEO*

*(co-written with Dr Godson Gatsha, Education
Specialist, Higher Education and Dr Sanjaya Mishra,
Education Specialist, eLearning)*

It is a privilege to be here in scenic Swaziland and an honour to be present, when DEASA celebrates and reflects on fifty years of widening access to education. I thank the organisers for giving me the opportunity to represent the Commonwealth of Learning, which may be about half the age of DEASA but shares the same commitment of widening access to education across the Commonwealth. I have prepared my presentation with two of my colleagues, Dr Godson Gatsha, who was an active DEASA member and Dr Sanjaya Mishra.

As you know, COL is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver for CHOGM 1987.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to harness the potential of distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training.

After wide consultations around the Commonwealth, we have developed a Strategic Plan 2015-21, entitled 'Learning for Sustainable Development', to align ourselves more closely to the global post-2015 agenda.

What do we mean by learning for sustainable development? We believe that learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. We look forward to working with you to widen access to quality learning for all, especially for those who still remain unreached.

Governments across the Commonwealth are looking for ways in which they can educate and skill their citizens for employment and entrepreneurship. Based on these priorities, COL's Strategic plan is organised in two sectors: education and skills, with gender as a crosscutting theme.

My topic today is 'Widening Access to Education in the Commonwealth: what have we learned?' I will first reflect on the evolution of DEASA over the last 43 years. After setting the global context, I will look at how ODL has evolved over the past five decades and the impact that technology has had on the way we teach and learn. Finally we will look at emerging trends and the road ahead.

Let us first look at the emergence and growth of DEASA.

Of the 15 SADC Member States, 13 countries have institutions and organisations that are members of DEASA. Institutions from Seychelles and Madagascar could be encouraged to join so that the entire SADC community is on board.

As we know, DEASA was formed in 1972 by representatives from Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland and from the South African Committee on Higher Education Trust, an organization which was opposed to the inferior Bantu Education in the then Apartheid times. The representatives at the time, I am informed, were mostly women from Ministries of Education, institutes and the SACHED Trust. Their vision, as we can see, has translated into a vibrant and dynamic organization that is contributing actively to widening access to education and learning in the region.

Over the years, the initial vision, evolved in line with global developments in Open and Distance Learning. When the Constitution was written in 2000, we can see that contemporary concerns were being articulated. DEASA would provide a forum for networking, would be inclusive and serve both formal and non-formal education institutions and promote quality distance education.

Consequently we witness a growth in membership, from 4 in the early days to the current 37. The membership which includes public, private and non-profit institutions and organisations, demonstrates that DEASA recognizes that access to education can only be widened by a diversity of providers complementing and supplementing mutual efforts.

DEASA has moved with the times and responded to the needs of its members. Over the years, we can see the initial meetings led to the organization of conferences and forums with a greater emphasis on research in ODL.

Emerging needs were reflected in the priorities articulated by DEASA. The need for ODL policy, the phenomenal growth in ICTs and how the challenge of HIV/AIDS could be addressed were taken up by the membership. I learn DEASA was instrumental in collaborating with the Ministries of Education, SADC-CDE and SADC Secretariat in developing a regional ODL Policy Framework and this was a first in Africa.

During 2008 to 2015, we can see the promotion of research through its International Journal of ODL, regular annual conferences and capacity building in ODL in collaboration with the SADC Secretariat and SADC-CDE. The vision to be a world-class powerhouse in ODL policies, standards, expertise and information-sharing in the SADC region, finds close resonance with COL's own mission and mandate.

COL has accompanied DEASA on its eventful journey through various capacity-building activities, supporting conferences, workshops, course development, research studies. DEASA in turn has promoted COL's visibility in the region and provided experts and consultants from time to time. It has been a productive partnership and one, that we at COL value. We will continue to leverage this relationship to promote learning for sustainable development as per our strategic plan.

To sum up, I would say that one, DEASA has been a strong advocate of ODL has influenced regional and national policy formulation; two, DEASA has evolved to stay in tune with the changing ODL scenario and three, DEASA has recognised the need for quality ODL and has invested in capacity building and research. What more might DEASA consider? I will come back to this in the concluding section.

Let us now briefly turn our attention to the global context in terms of demographics, the increasing demand for higher education and the phenomenal growth of technologies.

There are 1.2 billion young people between the ages of 15-24, most of them in developing countries. Africa is the youngest continent on the planet with 50% of its people under the age of 25. There is a high rate of unemployment especially among the youth.

In the previous decade we have seen an unprecedented demand for higher education. In 2007, there were 150 million tertiary students globally. We find that the number has increased to 165 million in 2012 with an estimate that this is expected to rise to 263 million in 2025.

What does this mean in real terms? If we are to accommodate the children who will reach enrolment age between now and 2025, we will need to build four new universities every single week with a capacity of 30,000. Is this a realistic option?

The rate of tertiary enrolment has grown substantially in SSA, the age participation rates (APRs) are less than 10%, well below other regions in the Commonwealth

As the Chair of the African Union Commission says and its worth quoting in full ' HE must help develop the skills to accelerate our development, to industrialise, to build and maintain our infrastructure, to manage our diversity and natural resources, to build shared prosperity, to strengthen and deepen our democracies and to building peaceful societies'. In short, universities must contribute to national development. What would be the role of ODL institutions?

In which ways can technology help?

What kinds of technology? While in North America, there are over 80 internet users per 100 persons, in developing countries the average drops to 31% while in the LDCs, the number of internet users is less than 5 percent.

In SSA, mobile devices have grown exponentially over the last decade. How can ODL institutions harness the potential of this affordable and available technology?

Within this context, let us how open and distance learning has evolved over the past decades.

As governments and policy makers sought to expand access to education, reduce costs and improve standards, they realized that traditional brick and mortar solutions would not be enough. The success of the Open University UK captured the imagination of policy makers around the world but particularly in developing countries.

When the Open University UK was established in 1969, the notion of ‘openness’ was a significant innovation. Lord Crowther, the founding chancellor of the Open University of the UK’s statement of openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas forms the basis of throwing open the ivory towers of higher education.

Let us look at the growth of open universities in the Commonwealth. In 1988, there were only 10 open universities in the Commonwealth, of which four were in Canada and the UK.

Twenty five years later, that number has tripled. You can see that the growth has happened in developing countries. The five Open Universities in Commonwealth Africa, will soon be joined by open universities in Botswana and Kenya.

What implications did traditional open universities have for pedagogy? What was new in this phase was that learning could take place without a teacher and self-instructional materials were developed to cater to the diverse needs of the learners. There was a greater use of radio and television to supplement print materials. The learner could learn at her own pace and place and there was a greater emphasis on flexibility and modularity.

With more access to technologies, we have seen an increasing trend towards online learning, especially in the developed countries. According to a Babson survey, 33.5 % of all higher education students take at least one online course. Almost all public and private institutions in the US offer online courses.

What is the situation in Africa? The Ambient report in 2013 showed that the aggregate growth rate was 15.2%. Senegal ranked the highest at 30% followed by Zambia and then Kenya.

In 2015, the situation seems to have changed and Africa could well be the most dynamic elearning market at over 16%.

IN which ways has online learning affected the way we teach and learn? Online courses brought in innovations such as authoring tools, learning management systems, unlimited web resources and online self-tests which introduced a greater scope for interactivity. Interactivity is a key aspect with a higher level of personalisation through the use of ICTs. This led to more flexible and blended approaches. Many campus based institutions began to offer both face to face and distance learning programmes, thereby opening up access to newer constituencies.

Let us look at the third trend. With the rise of social media, there has been a global movement towards collaboration in the development and sharing of content and we have seen the rise of Open Education Resources or OER. The fundamental principle is that any materials developed with public funds should be made available free to others.

OER are educational materials which are free and freely available. OER can be reused and repurposed to suit different needs and could be available in any medium, print, audio, video, digital. One key difference

between OER and other educational resources is that OER have an open license, which allows adaptation and reuse without having to request the copyright holder.

What implications have OER had for pedagogy? The student-content relationship with the focus on networks and collaboration led to the term ‘connectivism’. The emphasis is now on collaboration rather than competition and the learner’s role becomes more significant as s/he marks a shift from being a consumer to a producer of content.

Let us now come to the fourth major trend--the Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs, a form of distance and online learning.

Major consortia of the top universities on both sides of the Atlantic have led the movement. Coursera, Udacity, EdX and FutureLearn are the well-known leaders in MOOCs. While the first three are led by research universities in the US, FutureLearn was initiated by the Open University UK.

What of developing countries? One of the common objectives for adopting MOOCs in developing countries is to democratise access to higher education. The Malaysian Minister has encouraged institutions to leverage new technologies such as MOOC platforms to democratize access to higher education. The Indian government also wishes to use MOOC platforms to reach the unreached segments of society such as working class people and housewives.

MOOCs have so far been offered in HE. COL offers MOOCs for Development (MOOC4D) with technology options that work within low bandwidth scenarios in developing countries and provide offline-learning possibilities. The MOOC for gardeners in India was unique in many ways. Since this group has practically no access to the Internet and is likely to be unfamiliar with online learning, COL’s partner, the Indian Institute of Technology- Kanpur (IITK), built a complete suite of MOOC technologies to enable access to learning materials using a basic, voice-only cell phone. The content of this MOOC comprised sets of audio clips on farming practices. A key aspect of this course was the availability of a call center operated by the course team.

MOOCs mark yet another shift in teaching and learning—by putting greater responsibility on the learner to construct knowledge and to move from teaching a small class to a massive group around the world. The use of Learning Analytics, a component of the MOOC platform, can help us to collect and analyse data about how learning is taking place. Because of this, predictive systems can be developed to identify potential dropouts and provide the necessary support to help them overcome their difficulties. It can also highlight those areas where many students struggle so that the tutors get the feedback to take remedial measures.

Will MOOCs transform the way we teach and learn? A significant difference is the emergence of the flipped classroom as the standard practice. There is a greater emphasis on peer-to-peer learning.

MOOCs promote higher learner autonomy, and more structured course content. As ODL practitioners, we have catered to the autonomous learner and provided well designed content. But MOOCs, through the use of new technologies, has taken this to the next level. The modules have become smaller and more granular, there is a greater emphasis on short videos and more dialogue and interaction, mostly among

peers. 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.

However, ODL institutions 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.

What then is the road ahead?

The MDGs, which have helped the international community to achieve many targets such as poverty reduction and UPE will come to a close this year, to be followed by a successor framework—the sustainable development goals that will define the development agenda for the next 15 years.

Goal 4 of the 17 SDGs identified focuses on education. The objective of this Goal is to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all’ by 2030.

The goal has several targets: one, quality education must lead to effective learning outcomes, two, we must focus on developing skills for employment, entrepreneurship and global citizenship, and three, having qualified teachers in place will be critical to achieving these targets. This then will be the agenda as we go beyond 2015. What role can DEASA play to support this?

What are the emergent trends in technology globally? The recent Horizon report estimates that in the next two years, blended learning would be used increasingly, and institutions will redesign their learning spaces. Over the next three to five years, the focus will shift to measuring learning outcomes and OER will be available in more subject areas. In the longer term, we will see more innovation and collaboration within institutions (Johnson et al, 2015). How can DEASA support its membership to make these transitions effectively?

The recent eLearning Africa report asked respondents, what are the most commonly used ICTs? Laptops came first with 19%, smartphone at 14% and PCs at 13%. This is a dynamic field and we would need to watch this space. Mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets may well supersede PCs and laptops in the near future.

The same report surveyed the benefits of ICT in education. The top three uses identified were: one, to enhance learning; two, to equip students with digital skills to prepare them for the workforce and three, to access information.

Given the importance of ICT in education, how many institutions/countries have ICT in Education policies? This slide may be of interest. Eight countries have ICT in Education policies developed over the last decade. You will note that six African institutions have OER policies. What role can DEASA play? From the lessons we have learned around the Commonwealth, let me identify four areas.

First, we need to strengthen ODL systems. We still face a crisis of credibility. This could be done through developing enabling policy frameworks in member institutions. Around the Commonwealth, there is a great need for robust QA mechanisms to establish the credibility of ODL provision. At COL, we have found that we can achieve up to 80-85% learner success rates when personalized learner support is provided. Another key dimension would be capacity building of all levels of staff to take ownership of ODL and to contribute to its effective delivery.

COL has developed several resources in all these areas that you can access free from our website. These have been developed by experts and validated through wide consultation across the Commonwealth and can be easily adapted to your needs.

ODL institutions have a mixed record of research output. ODL institutions are committed to research, do invest funds in research activities and offer both capacity building opportunities and dissemination channels for research. Yet there seems to be a gap between research and action. For example, how relevant is the research we conduct to our day to day operations? Does our research on new pedagogies influence the way we format and structure content? Or how we provide tutorial support? Or do we continue to do what we've always done?

Here again COL has several resources, one of which is the PREST materials that BOCODOL has offered.

We need more advocacy for OER and open access policies. ODL institutions can embrace openness in a systematic manner. This would include adopting and adapting OER as well as open access policies for sharing and collaborating on research locally and globally.

COL has developed a directory of OER of free courses from around the Commonwealth that you find useful.

Over the years, DEASA has responded to the key needs of the hour. It responded to the challenge of HIV/AIDS, when this was one of the most prominent issues a decade ago. Today, our young people need to be trained for employment and entrepreneurship. How can ODL be deployed to support them and to accelerate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals? ODL was initially harnessed to provide increased access to higher education—it has evolved to embrace other sectors of formal education such as teacher training and secondary schooling. How can we use it effectively to promote non-formal and informal learning as well? How can DEASA promote learning for sustainable development?

With that, let me thank you for your kind attention.