

Opening Remarks: State Open University Vice Chancellors' Forum



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Video Presentation
State Open University Vice Chancellors' Forum
Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Gujarat, India

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Hon Minister, Vice Chancellor, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Vice Chancellors, Distinguished Colleagues, thank you for the invitation to deliver the opening remarks at this high-level Forum.

We are here to discuss how the recommendations of the National Education Policy can be implemented and what role the open universities can play. The NEP states that increased access, equity, and inclusion in higher education will be achieved through online education and Open and Distance Learning with a national target of 50% GER by 2035. The GER in India is about 27% with women's participation marginally higher than that of men. About 11% of all enrolments in HE are in distance learning programmes with a substantial percentage of women. Of the 33 open universities in the Commonwealth, 19 are in India and are making a concrete contribution towards increasing the GER.

One silver lining of the Covid-19 pandemic was the global acceptance of distance and online learning. However, emergency remote learning is not distance education and as the open and distance learning community, we have much to share with the higher education sector. As more institutions are offering distance and blended learning, how can we maintain our niche and leadership position in this field?

COL conducted a survey of 28 Open Universities in the Commonwealth which shows a decreasing trend in enrolments compared to five years ago. Can this be attributed to the increase in the number of institutions offering ODL? What needs to be done to improve enrolment and retention? Another interesting trend is that more open universities have initiated face-to-face programmes and online courses in comparison to five years ago. This indicates that dedicated open universities are becoming multi-modal. There is a heavy reliance on part-time teaching staff at OUs, and the number of learners per tutor has also increased. We know that learner support is critical not just for tutorials but also for mental health, well-being and success. The encouraging trend is that the OUs surveyed have reflected on and identified key priorities such as the pressing need for quality, inclusion, internationalisation and research, all of which feature prominently in the NEP.

COL also brought out a report on distance education in India which indicates that in addition to increasing access, OUs also provide equity by reaching women and persons in remote rural areas.

However, OUs are only reaching less than 1% of persons with disabilities. There is an increasing emphasis on quality. The report makes several recommendations—these include focusing on employability, adopting innovative assessments, using micro-credentials to make learning more flexible, and strengthening digital infrastructure and connectivity.

Developments in technology will continue to drive changes in the way we teach and learn. AI is being mainstreamed in education. Intelligent Tutoring Systems use AI techniques to simulate one-to-one human tutoring and provide timely feedback. A popular example of AI in education is a Virtual Teaching Assistant that can offer personalized assistance to learners. ODL is moving from massification to personalisation. Generative AI such as ChatGPT, if effectively harnessed and ethically regulated, can help develop quality content, assessments, learner support, substantially reducing the workload of teachers.

We hope the discussions at this meeting will generate a road map for concrete action. Given the magnitude of the challenges that lie ahead, we need to pool our expertise and resources, and work towards a common goal. In the past, open universities were trying to achieve parity of esteem with campus institutions. As Victor Hugo said, ‘nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come’—the time for ODL is now—*carpe diem* or seize the day.