Future of Open Universities

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It is a pleasure to be here in person and I must thank Prof Dr Fuat Erdal, Rector Anadolu University and Prof Ojat Dorajat, President AAOU for the invitation. The Commonwealth of Learning has accompanied AAOU on its exciting journey over the years and watched it grow from strength to strength. AAOU is a dynamic and lively forum that is well-recognised for encouraging an open exchange of ideas, promoting research and strengthening networks and collaborations to enhance the quality of education. My presentation today will address the theme of the conference 'Future of Open Universities', which I have prepared jointly with my colleague Dr Sanjaya Mishra.

The past three years have caused so much disruption and change and this is a good time for us as the open and distance learning community to reflect collectively on how we can be better prepared to face the uncertain future that lies ahead. I will begin my presentation by reviewing the growth and development of open universities and how they emerged to address national needs at particular moments in history. I will then look at some of the key issues in higher education today followed by how open universities have responded to emerging trends. In conclusion, I will outline the five directions that can lead to a sustainable future for our open universities.

Let me begin by going back to the origins of the open university and how it has delivered value over the years.

As far back as 1728, the Boston Gazette advertised a shorthand course to persons around the country, offering 'several lessons sent weekly' and promising that they would 'be as perfectly instructed as those that live in Boston.' Distance or location would not compromise learning. When the penny post started in nineteenth century England, Pitman's shorthand training became a popular distance learning course. Distance learning was born as an innovative start-up by entrepreneurs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This laid the foundation of open universities, as we know them today. UNISA is often considered the first open university in the world. It offered distance learning in 1946 during the apartheid years bringing education to a multi-racial student body. Its most famous alumnus Nelson Mandela turned to distance education during his long incarceration.

The UK too felt the need to create an Open University to use technologies to reach those who did not have access to traditional campus institutions—a model that was adopted and adapted by policy

makers across the world. OU UK started as a means of providing second chance education to the working class, the adult learner and those who had stayed on the margins of elite higher education.

The model changed when it was adapted to different contexts. AIOU was established as the people's university in Pakistan and in addition to tertiary level programmes, it also offered open schooling as a bridge to higher education.

The open university of Sri Lanka came soon after and became well known as a pioneer for offering science and engineering education using distance learning. The science kits it sent to students for practical work became a model for many other institutions at the time.

A recent COL report on distance education in India refers to 17 open universities and 110 dual mode institutions. The overall GER in higher education is 29% with government plans to increase the GER to 50 % by 2035. This will only be possible by expanding the existing distance learning ecosystem.

The Open University of China emerged from a wide network of radio and TV universities with a mission to "serving socialist construction, producing qualified manpower needed for the socialist construction and raising the scientific and cultural level of the whole nation". Source: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED407601.pdf

As we can see from these examples, open universities were set up to enhance access to higher education, promote national development and reach the unreached—especially those in remote areas, marginalized communities and persons with disabilities. Technology was the key driver in these developments.

Applying Christensen's disruptive innovation model to higher education, we find that in the last few decades distance education was the real innovation at the bottom of the pyramid that continues to challenge mainstream face-to-face higher education. Campus institutions have consolidated their position over 900 years of existence and the state, students and parents continue to sustain the demand for them. However, distance education began to cater to those who were left outside the mainstream.

Let us look at the broader global context for higher education today.

In 2015, the global community identified 17 sustainable development goals that would be achieved by 2030. SDG 4 aspires to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all by 2030. Even before the pandemic struck, the world was trailing on most targets — this progress is woefully offtrack at the mid-point.

One target of SDG 4 relates to ensuring access to affordable and quality tertiary education for all — which includes technical and vocational training. While open universities are well placed to contribute to affordable quality education, how many are promoting technical and vocational skills for livelihoods?

Developments in AI over the last few months have generated expectations that this might be the breakthrough the education sector is looking for. AI is promising--can help institutions raise productivity, reduce costs, develop assessments and support credit transfers. A recent report on the

Impact of AI in Education found that AI generated videos were as engaging as human videos, AI helped personalise content, supported automated grading and lowered the costs of learning materials. The promise of AI in education is already being realised. However, certain issues still need to be addressed.

As a broad framework, the Russell group of institutions, UK proposes five guiding principles. Universities must support learners to become AI literate, build the capacity of staff, promote the ethical use of AI and ensure academic rigour. To achieve these objectives, institutions must work collaboratively to optimise the potential of this evolving field. As open universities, what steps are we taking?

As we know, the digital divide is alive and well. The global average for internet connectivity is 60% while in SSA it is only 40%. Women are 12% less likely to own a mobile phone than men. Any investment in ICT infrastructure must make provision for reaching the last mile so that existing inequalities are not exacerbated.

Technology is growing faster than anyone can keep pace with—presenting exciting opportunities and unprecedented risks. The jobs that exist today were unheard of ten years ago and the jobs of the future will need to be aligned to the green and blue economies. We have a young Commonwealth and a higher rate of youth unemployment as compared to the global average.

According to the World Economic Forum, the high demand jobs of the next five years will be in AI, Machine learning and IT. Jobs in banking, postal services and data entry will be in decline. How can open universities pivot to skilling and reskilling our youth for the jobs of the future?

The climate crisis is one of the defining issues of our times and has the power to destroy and damage entire education systems. The tsunami in Tonga and the floods in Pakistan caused major disruptions to education. Critical data and student records may be wiped out entirely, leading to the collapse of entire systems.

The education sector too contributes to both direct and indirect emissions, with an impact on environmental degradation and associated economic costs. As Bill Gates has pointed out in his book—How to Avoid a Climate Disaster—cement, steel and plastic, essential for construction are the biggest emitters of carbon. Can distance and online learning lower the carbon footprint of education?

How can we fast track progress towards addressing these issues? UNESCO has proposed a five steps for shaping higher education for the future. This means universities must increase access to higher education, promote equity and inclusion, improve quality, increase financing and strengthen distance and online learning. As we know, open universities are traditionally known to contribute to all these dimensions—by increasing access, improving quality, reducing costs and promoting equity. They also contribute to the financial dimensions—by achieving cost efficiencies and economies of scale.

With such an impressive track record, are OU's keeping pace with changing times?

What do emerging trends indicate?

Open and distance learning has evolved over the years as we can see from Prof Taylor's five generations of distance learning—which sum up the development from correspondence education to multi-media to online provision which includes the use of AI in teaching and learning. During the pandemic, the world witnessed all five generations being utilised by different stakeholders.

Traditionally, distance education has been used around the world to democratise higher education. The 33 open universities in Commonwealth countries catered to over 5 million learners annually.

Comparing data with COL's previous report, in 2017, there is a decline of student numbers from 4.4 million to 3.4 million. Can this decline in student numbers be due to the increased number of providers in this space?

Compared to this, in the global north, the BC Open University, part of the Open Learning Agency merged with a college in 2005 to become Thomson Rivers University.

The Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong transformed as the single-mode dedicated Open University of Hong Kong in 1997. Today, due to changing demands for agile learning, it has transformed yet again to become the HK Metropolitan University, a dual mode institution.

While in the global north, open universities have merged with campus institutions, in the global south single dedicated mode open universities continue to grow and flourish, the most recent one being the Open University of Kenya which started operations this August. There are several reasons for these trends, including changing government priorities, public perceptions about ODL, demographic changes and financial considerations.

As such, open universities have kept pace with changing times and national needs. The Open University of China used ODL for poverty alleviation by adopting targeted interventions to support village communities, which improved income and livelihoods for about 50,000 people.

As populations age and live longer, open universities see the opportunity to cater to the needs of the third age. This was being done by the Open University of Japan which had a sizeable population over the age of 60 in the past to the Open University of China which has recently established the National University of the Aged.

When global brands such as Coursera and FutureLearn led the phenomenal growth in MOOC enrolments, open universities, which had earlier hesitated to offer online courses came forward to offer MOOCs especially for professional development. Last year IGNOU offered 151 MOOCs through the government sponsored MOOC platform, SWAYAM.

As the demand for shorter qualifications increases, OUUK offers microcredentials on the FutureLearn platform. Athabasca University too uses its own platform PowerED to offer online microcredentials for professional development.

The past two decades witnessed the growth of Open Educational Resources—which were in high demand during the pandemic as both teachers and students looked for quality digital content. Several Open Universities have invested in OER Repositories including the National Open University of Nigeria, the Open University of Sri Lanka and Wawasan Open University.

New developments in AI have been exponential with major implications for institutions, teachers and students. KNOU and VUP offer courses in AI, Anadolu University was one of the first to initiate research on AI and online learning and OUUK is focusing on implications of AI for learning design and assessments. Within this context, let us review some of the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities for OUs.

We all know that one of the greatest strengths of OUs is the focus on providing access, equity and flexibility at scale. OU's pioneered the blended approach to learning keeping in mind the needs of adult learners who must combine study with work and family responsibilities. Today blended learning is seen as an innovation but OU's have silently led several innovations related to technology, pedagogy and operations.

Despite our strengths and contributions to national development and social justice, perceptions of poor quality continue to linger and completion rates remain low. Is there a greater need to focus on learner support and research?

Since the global community embraced distance learning during the pandemic, the growth in the number of online providers has increased the competition. Open universities are facing challenges keeping up with the explosive growth of technologies and the changing nature of jobs.

But as we know, every challenge is also an opportunity. Today there is better ICT infrastructure and connectivity, new AI tools and access to OER. Now is the time for OUs to build on these foundations and transform themselves into leaders in higher education.

Open universities have come a long way from Sir John's famous iron triangle of access quality and costs to a pentagon which also includes equity and ecology.

What then are the future directions for open universities? Let us consider five.

First, futurist Alvin Toffler wrote 'The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn'. The literate of the 21st century will be lifelong learners. But lifelong learning cannot be perceived as a mere course or programme. It is a culture that needs to be integrated into every aspect of the open university. Policies and programmes should focus on building a learning culture by promoting the development of skills knowledge and values on a continuous basis—this requires learning, unlearning and relearning.

The recent Global Education Monitoring Report indicates that there is a decline in post graduate students in upper middle-income countries. Where are the opportunities for OUs? Will shorter just-in-time training satisfy this constituency?

A recent study in the US shows that even at the undergraduate level, there is a decline in the completion rates of students in language, literature, education and liberal arts. The real need and demand is in IT related jobs, health care and newer interests such as leisure and fitness.

Micro credentials will have a significant role in the effective implementation of lifelong learning.

Second, OUs were established to democratize and massify higher education. Technologies today enable us to not only personalize learning but also to predict new target audiences and identify areas of interest.

This requires pedagogical innovations as the new report from OUUK indicates. There are dazzling technologies available but the real success will be when these can harnessed for pedagogic purposes and for reaching the last mile.

One such powerful tool is AI which can help make teaching and learning more engaging and productive by providing a personal tutor for each learner.

Third, the nature of jobs is changing and collaboration with the labour market is no longer an option. As the recent report from Boston Consulting Group indicates, universities need to partner with industry in offering job-specific courses, meta-skills such as critical thinking, and immersion training in the industry.

Another option is to integrate employability into university curricula. COL has been promoting the implementation of an employability framework in universities in Nigeria, Namibia and Mauritius.

Whatever field they decide to pursue, our youth will need three literacies, as proposed by Aoun. First, human literacy, prepares students to perform jobs that only human beings can do and help them to make ethical choices. Second, data literacy is essential where learners must be able to find meaning and separate the true from the fake. Third, technological literacy is essential for learners to deploy software and hardware for creativity and excellence. How can OUs ensure this?

Fourth, open universities are in a unique position to address the biggest challenge of our time, which relates to environmental sustainability. In the past three decades, several initiatives have emerged to promote sustainability in higher education. As Caird and Roy sum up, these are related to greening the curriculum, greening the campus and using distance and online learning.

A COL report to ministers of education, promotes the adoption of a green learning agenda in all educational institutions. This agenda needs to focus on developing the skills for green jobs that help make the transition to a low carbon economy; green life skills and behavioural change for a more sustainable future and skills for a green transformation that address issues of social justice.

Does distance and online learning promote environmental sustainability? The OU, UK compared the carbon emissions of ICT-enhanced and face to-face courses and found that distance teaching models had significantly lower environmental impacts (Caird et al. 2013; Caird et al. 2015). COL conducted a similar study in Botswana, and found that the average learning-related carbon footprint of the distance learning group is nearly three times less than that of the campus counterpart. Since this is an emerging field, more research is needed and I call upon you to focus on this critical area.

Finally, it is most important for us to emerge from the shadows of the erstwhile correspondence courses and the constant search for 'parity of esteem' with campus institutions. The time has come for us to claim our rightful place as leaders in the education sector.

Leadership at all levels will be key. We need to reflect on and question our fundamentals. Does access to education diminish inequality? Are we contributing to a world where everyone is free to learn? How will leaders in open universities ensure the quality of open education that is affordable and accessible for all? These are big goals that cannot be achieved alone. We are very grateful to AAOU for providing us the valuable platform for networking and collaboration so that we can work together for the prosperity of the people and the planet.