

# All Things Research in Open, Distance and eLearning



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Vice Chancellor, Distinguished Colleagues, thank you for the invitation to present the keynote at the 2022 UNISA Open Distance and eLearning virtual conference. My topic today is 'All Things Research in Open, Distance and eLearning' which I have prepared jointly with my colleague Dr Sanjaya Mishra.

In this presentation, I will begin by reflecting on what we mean by open, distance and eLearning followed by an outline of the status of research in this field. This will lead into what research tells us about the effectiveness of the different dimensions of open, distance and eLearning. I will then look at some of the missing links in the research and conclude with what lessons we can draw from existing good practice to build cultures of research in ODeL institutions.

Let us first look at what we mean by open distance and eLearning.

Open learning describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. The founding chancellor of the Open University of the UK, Lord Crowther defined openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas. This is the philosophical basis of open education. But how open are we in practice?

Many open universities do not insist on entry qualifications, allow learners to accumulate credits at their own pace and convenience and are flexible enough to allow learners to choose the courses they wish to study towards their qualification. Openness in terms of access, curriculum, participation and accreditation is quite different from the emergency remote learning that we experienced during the pandemic.

As we know, distance education is the separation of teacher and learner which is mediated by some kind of technology – this happened during the pandemic. But distance education requires a great deal of systematic planning where an institution designs and develops learning materials and provides ongoing learner support.

In open and distance education, synchronous learning is not the only option – we can choose to learn asynchronously at any time and any place of our choice. It also points in the direction of competency-based learning where duration becomes insignificant and what counts is the outcomes

achieved rather than the hours put in. Distance learning is flexible enough to combine institutional and work-placed learning to suit individual needs.

Open and distance learning has developed over the years. Prof Taylor's five generations of distance learning models sums up the evolution from correspondence education to multi-media to online provision—all phases embodied in the UNISA experience.

ODL institutions have typically adopted a blended approach which combines both distance/online and in person provision.

What kind of research have we conducted in this field?

Michael Moore observed in 1985 that distance education research was largely amateur, unsystematic and badly designed with very little value.

Fifteen years later, there does not seem to be a substantial change in how DE research is viewed. Saba laments the lack of theoretical underpinning which is also echoed by Hilary Perraton who calls DE research 'often atheoretical and predominantly descriptive'

Another ten years later, Zawacki-Richter et al conducted a survey of 675 articles in five journals from Australia, Canada, UK, USA and found that male researchers were more likely to use quantitative methods while female researchers tended to use qualitative techniques, confirming prevalent stereotypes.

Research trends from 35 years of publications in the journal Distance Education outline how the focus changed over the years—from institutional consolidation to educational technology, to quality assurance, virtual universities and more recently, MOOCs and OER.

It is interesting to note that most of the research conducted during covid 19 focused on the post-secondary sector, with an increased interest in medical and health sciences. Over one third of the papers were descriptive and 43% adopted quantitative approaches.

For advocates of ODL, the silver lining of the pandemic has been the global acceptance of distance and online learning. A recent study in the UK found that the majority of university students rated the quality of online learning as excellent.

On the other hand, at the UBC, over 60% students did not think that the emergency remote teaching was as effective as in-person provision.

If we review research trends since 2014, we find that the focus has mainly been on the expanding remit of open education, the role of educational technologies and the quality of online learning.

Let us now look at what research tells us about the efficiency and effectiveness of open distance and elearning.

Traditionally ODeL institutions have provided increased access and equity. In 2020, 11.1 % of all higher education students in India were studying at a distance with over 44 % of them being female. In South Africa in 2019, over 34% of students in the tertiary sector were enrolled in distance

education, with 68% of them being female. While ODeL is expanding access, is it reaching the unreached?

ODeL institutions achieve scale as compared to campus institutions, which drives down the costs. One study found that while face to face costs per participant were USD 6.7, the same training was offered online at half the costs with comparable outcomes. Since each context is different, do we have enough studies on the costs of ODeL?

During the pandemic, teachers needed access to quality digital content. There was an increase in the use of Open Educational Resources or OER. A COL study in Antigua and Barbuda found that using OER textbooks reduced the costs for students and at the same time improved learning outcomes. Yet the uptake of OER has not reached the tipping point—what more needs to be done

Researchers at Concordia University carried out a meta-analysis of several studies to find out what kind of interaction led to the best learning outcomes. They looked at student-text; student-student; and student-teacher interactions. Interestingly, the student content interaction was the most effective, making a case for the use of quality OER.

A recent meta-analysis concludes that technology integration in class resulted in a significant improvement in knowledge and skills. Online learning was also perceived as good as in-class learning with some improvement in learning outcomes. But the most significant finding was that blended learning performed better than face to face instruction.

In addition to the pandemic, we have recently seen vast disruptions due to climate related disasters. How can we reduce the carbon footprint of education? Following research by the Open University, UK, COL conducted a similar study in Botswana, which found that the average carbon footprint of the campus learner is nearly three times greater than that of the distance learner. Emissions from travel were by far the greatest contributor to this disparity. This is one area which needs further research.

What are the opportunities for research in the use of technologies to take ODeL to the next level? AI can generate data that can help us to customise and improve student learning. Blockchain technologies become more relevant in the age of micro-credentials and student mobility with tamper-proof certification. AR/VR can help develop skills at scale and robotics makes it possible for us to provide chatbots or teaching assistants for providing personalized support to thousands of learners.

Generally, ODeL institutions are not seen as major players in research. What holds them back? Where are the missing links?

Let us just take up three barriers that are often cited as reasons. The first is that open and distance learning institutions have a social mission, so their priority is equity rather than research. The second is inadequate capacity or opportunities for training in research and finally inadequate dissemination channels.

If we look at the mission statement of the Open University UK, we find that it foregrounds both social justice and academic research as their priority. Clearly, there is no contradiction between the

commitment to a social mission and a focus on research. In fact, both must go hand in hand—but where did we miss out as the ODeL community?

Regarding the lack of time and resources to build research capacity, today we have thousands of free resources available to train young faculty members. One such is the Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training or PREST materials developed by COL and available free on our website.

Do we have a dearth of dissemination channels? COL's Journal of Learning for Development provides a forum for the publication of research with a focus on innovation in learning, and its contribution to development. Another dissemination channel is COL's Pan Commonwealth Forum which happens once every three years. The tenth PCF is being organized with Athabasca University and will be held in Calgary this September. COL's objective is to promote research to improve the quality of ODeL and train a cadre of future leaders to take forward the baton from the previous generation of gurus and stalwarts.

It is clear that ODL institutions are committed to research. Yet the missing link seems to be the 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 content? Or how we provide tutorial support? Or do we continue to do what we've always done? And research and action continue to exist in separate worlds which often do not meet.

What is it that we can do going forward?

What can we learn from the industry? In this study, managers believed that research and innovation is driven primarily by the corporate culture of an organization. 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 from managers on what drives research and innovation. They believed that research and innovation depended largely on the right people. So, we find the importance of people and an enabling environment as critical to driving research.

Panda et al suggest that in addition to building research capacity, mentorship whether in person or online, can be very helpful.

Bland et al identify 15 institutional characteristics that promote research in German institutions. The German recipe for building an institutional culture of research emphasises the importance of collegiality, where people can test their out-of-the-box thinking without the fear of being ridiculed. It means that staff have enough time earmarked for research rather than having to fit it in within over-committed teaching schedules. It also means that each institution needs to identify and build on existing strengths.

How can we promote institutional cultures of research? A culture of research is an institutional culture that does three things: fosters an environment of creativity and innovation; values and rewards research and uses the research to inform both policy and practice towards continuous improvement.

What do we need to strengthen research going forward? Govt policies and funding will be critical. Technology infrastructure and connectivity will be key in promoting research and collaborations within and across borders. ODeL institutions need to align more closely with the needs of their societies and promote research that leads to sustainable development.

On that note, let me thank you for your kind attention.