

Rethinking Openness: Experiences from the Commonwealth



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Hello and good morning to everyone. At the outset, I am thankful to the organisers for the invitation to the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to speak at this important conference, and I am grateful to Prof. Asha Kanwar, President and CEO of COL for nominating me to present this Keynote. It is an honour and privilege to present online via Zoom. It is a humbling feeling for me. My apologies for not being present in person due to the unavoidable and unusual circumstances that I faced last week. I would also like to put a disclaimer here about my presentation. The views expressed are mine and are not necessarily that of COL. However, I have extensively reused some of our previously published slides in this presentation. Today, my talk is on “Rethinking openness: experiences from the Commonwealth”.

Most of you may not be knowing about the Commonwealth of Learning or COL. We are an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987 with our headquarters in Vancouver, Canada and a regional office in Delhi, India.

Our mission is to help the 53 Commonwealth Member States and their educational institutions to use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to quality education and training.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

And in order to meet the needs of our stakeholders we promote and use a range of technologies –new and old – use of television and radio to use of online technologies and smartphones, with a focus on their innovative applications for teaching and learning.

Today, my plan is to start with the context of the world where teaching and learning is situated. I will then focus on the evolution of open and distance learning, its manifestations in different forms in the Commonwealth and a vision for rethinking openness in our institutions.

We live in an unequal world. Access to education in different parts of the world is uneven. According to current estimates, over 258 million children are out of school and more than 50% of young people in 133 countries have not completed upper secondary schools.

Access to tertiary education is key to development. Globally the GER in tertiary education is over 37%, but many developing Commonwealth countries are still struggling at below 15%. How can we open up access to quality education?

Technological development is on the roll. Mobile-cellular subscription has crossed human population. Over 50% people in the world use Internet and broadband penetration is increasing. However, according to ITU estimates, “in developed countries, 83.2 per cent of households possess a computer in 2018, compared with 36.3 per cent in developing countries.” Even the costs of data in many developing countries is way beyond the reach of the average learner.

In the Unites states students spend USD 1200 per year to buy textbooks. Over 5.2 million students use financial aid to purchase their textbooks. About 65% students inform that their grades are affected due to non-purchase of required textbooks. The situation is worse in the developing world. In Cameroon, in 2012, 12 students shared one reading textbook and 14 students shared a mathematics textbook in grade 2. Average higher education students in Bangladesh spend BDT 1850 per year on books and supplies, and in Malaysia 76.4% learners decide not to buy textbooks due to high costs.

Today, affordability of higher education is a big question mark? The cost of university education has increased significantly in many countries like India and South Africa. According to a report from the Economist, “If this trend continues against a backdrop of slow income growth, tertiary education will become more expensive.” In which ways can we harness the potential of open and distance learning to make tertiary education more affordable?

Higher education leads to higher earnings and social mobility. But, the world of work is undergoing fast changes due to technological advancements leading to a mismatch on qualified people and availability of skills required. There is a skills shift happening, and over “45% employers did not find skilled individuals to recruit”, according to a study. A McKinsey report highlighted that by 2020 there will be a global shortfall of 85 million high- and middle-skilled workers. How are we preparing our graduates for the world of work?

While the global youth unemployment average is nearly 13%, in many Commonwealth countries it is well over 40%. The Commonwealth is young with 60% of its population under the age of 30. Youth unemployment is a key challenge for the governments. What do we need to do differently to make our youth ready for employment and entrepreneurship?

So, today, we live in a world full of educational challenges: how to increase access to educational opportunities, uneven quality of teaching and learning amongst educational institutions in the same country, gender inequality in education, high unemployment rate, particularly amongst the youth, and challenges to providing lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities in the context of growing automation of the world of work. How are we responding to these challenges, and my premise today is increasing openness holds the key to our success in mitigating these challenges.

Let us review the evolution of open and distance learning to understand the trends.

Despite the challenges, in most of the places around the world the teaching and learning environments follow the business as usual approach.

How are the universities changed over time? Ronald Barnett from the functioning and epistemological perspectives proposed a four-quadrant model of universities that we can extend to analyse the nature of being a university in the 21st century. At the quadrant (a) we have the ivory tower universities like that of the Oxford and Cambridge model; at quadrant (b) we have several disciplinary universities like university for technology, agriculture universities, and medical universities; at quadrant (c) we can put private and corporate universities that are more enterprising, while in quadrant (d) we can put open and virtual universities. The boundaries of these quadrants are permeable, and each of the categories can have characteristics of the other, what is important to note is the notion of ‘developmental university’, whose

objective is to help improve the world – by putting the knowledge to work for the world. This is something that the open universities continuously aspire to and should focus in their programme offerings.

Today's open and distance learning started in the 18th century as correspondence study for skills training on shorthand writing. It was only in the 20th century that the first distance teaching university emerged as an innovation in the contemporary higher education.

Since then open and distance learning has seen several developments -- Generation 1: correspondence model to the current 5th Generation intelligent flexible learning model. The field of open distance learning has primarily adopted technologies of the time to provide relevant education and training.

Using today's understanding of how disruptions work, we can safely say that open and distance learning has been a disruptive innovation in higher education serving the learner at the bottom of the pyramid and 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, open and distance learning began to cater to those who were left outside mainstream higher education, and today the face-to-face educational institutions have started embracing open and distance learning in the form of massive open online courses.

Otto Peters called this model as an industrial model hallmarked by division of labour, mass education and strong focus on planning and organisation. This model now manifests in different ways.

I categorise these in five different models: single mode open universities, dual mode universities, consortium model, virtual university model, and multi-modal universities.

While single mode open universities started in 1969, the model promoted by them are still relevant in many countries due to lack of access to technology. They provide a cost-effective way to increase access and improve quality of education anywhere, anytime.

Increasingly, the conventional face-to-face institutions are adopting online technologies to offer online/blended programmes. In the US, the Babson Survey 2018 reported that 31.6% students were taking at least one distance course on campus. This model normally uses the strengths of the existing faculty to reach more learners, and increasingly seen as a new business model for universities.

The Open University Malaysia is an interesting example of consortium model, where 11 public universities joined together to start another university specializing in offering distance and online courses. This model has further seen new ways of collaboration by bringing in several other initiatives such as COL's own Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), the Open Universities Australia and OER universitas. The strength of the collaborative model is the power of network – that reduces time and efforts and optimises existing resources.

Many countries have also started virtual universities to leverage the potential of technologies, and especially the power of the increased access to internet and mobile technologies. Such models like the Virtual University Pakistan is an example for other countries to follow.

The Open University United Kingdom is an example of an emerging new model that uses multiple strategies and has moved from its single mode approach to use of a range of technologies, including MOOCs. Its FutureLearn platform provide social learning opportunities that are accredited to provide formal credentials. Many of the courses are now offered on this platform in collaboration with other universities.

The ICDE study on open online flexible and technology-enhanced models in higher education provides a framework for analysing different institutions. This framework provides five areas for critical analysis: Content, Delivery, Recognition, Flexibility and Openness. This model also indicated that educational institutions are increasingly adopting different ways and a strict categorisation is difficult to make, as they demonstrate different levels of engagements in different areas depending on their own contextual requirements.

Let me now move to the developments in ODL, particularly in the Commonwealth.

When COL first started operations in 1988, there were ten open universities in the Commonwealth. Three in Canada alone with just one in Africa, UNISA, the oldest distance teaching university in the world.

Today there are 31 open universities in the Commonwealth. The trend is clear—developed countries are mainstreaming ODL in campus universities while developing countries are investing in open universities.

COL conducted a survey of open universities in the Commonwealth and found that collectively, these institutions catered to 4.4 million learners in 2016, offered over 2,400 programmes in almost all areas of knowledge with over 18,000 courses.

These universities offered courses and programmes at higher secondary levels to doctoral degree programmes and also used a range of modes, including face-to-face and online technologies.

Most of these universities largely depend on part-time teachers for delivery of their programmes and courses. At the time of the study, there were more full-time women teachers.

The percentage of learners leaving with a qualification as compared to the enrollment in a particular year shows the output rate of these universities. For most of the open universities, the output rate is below 20%, indicating the flexibility they provide to the learners to complete programmes/ courses.

Most of the universities today are facing multiple challenges. New emerging models of educational delivery such as MOOCs are both an opportunity for new business models and a threat to status quo. There is an increased pressure on Vice-Chancellors and Presidents to show results within reduced budget. Learners today are digital natives, and thus universities need to adapt new technologies efficiently and effectively. Moreover, there is a strong societal pressure to excel as centres for knowledge creation and also provide relevant skills to produce employable graduates. In such a challenging environment, how are the open universities preparing themselves?

The strategic plan of Athabasca University, Canada is entitled ‘Imagine: Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities’ and positions itself as an institution which is ‘open, flexible and everywhere’. In order to meet this promise, it has adopted agile course development using OER, data informed student services and a digital strategy that helps them to reach the remotest learners.

Keeping pace with the changing times, the OU, UK has extended its global footprint through its FutureLearn initiative. It uses multiple media channels such as iTunes and YouTube and is using technologies to improve student support systems.

UNISA is becoming increasingly paperless by using OER, e-books, e-tutors and e-mentors. It ensures that every student has access to a PC or tablet and the internet. It also had mandated increasing use of open educational materials.

The Open University of Tanzania is using technologies to address the issue of providing access to people with disabilities. The Open University of Mauritius is changing its systems to integrate employability.

The National Open University of Nigeria is using Technology-Enabled Learning to increase participation rate.

So, what are the common elements that open universities in the Commonwealth are focusing to address the global educational challenges. They are increasingly using technology to enhance access and reach, using openly licensed resources to reduce costs, building partnerships to expand and optimise resources, strengthening learner support for students' success, and using data to drive innovation and research.

My proposition today is to urge you to rethink openness that may help us accelerate the pace of these developments.

I am sure you will recall the traditional definition of distance education proposed by Desmond Keegan, who said distance education is characterised by (i) separation of teacher and learner, (ii) presence of an institution to provide accreditation of learning, (iii) use of mixed media courseware, (iv) two-way communication between student and teacher, (v) possibility of face-to-face meeting of learners, and (vi) industrial process of operation.

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 defined openness in relation to people, to places, to methods and to ideas. How much of our current open and distance learning practice is truly 'open'?

Open education as such is a philosophical construct that refers to policies and practices that allow entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender, or time constraints. In practice, openness is about open entry, learning anywhere, anytime, and the freedom to choose courses.

The emerging notion of open in contemporary educational discourse leads us to other manifestations of open such as: Open source software, Open access to scientific information, Open educational resources, and Open science. Much of these focusing on opening up access through questioning the existing copyright regime.

Late Fred Mulder from Netherlands called for an ecosystem approach to open education and highlighted that a true open education enterprise should focus on open teaching, open learning services, open educational resources, and also emphasise the need for openness to learners needs and providing openness to their employability.

Som Naidu articulated openness using three dimensions: (i) Open access which is inclusive and equal access to educational opportunities without barriers such as entry qualifications and ability to pay, (ii) Open learning which is the ability to study and learn at anytime, anywhere and at any pace, and (iii) Open scholarship which comprises releasing educational resources under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others.

The European open education framework provides ten dimensions of open education to focus.

Based on review of these developments, I propose a framework to measure openness as a self-test and aspire to become more open to address the global educational challenges. The criteria I propose include (i) exclusive entry to anyone entry, (ii) study from one location to anywhere learning, (iii) fixed schedule to anytime learning, (iv) fixed course basket to provision of a la carte approach to course selection, (v) sage on stage teaching to a highly collaborative learning environment, (vi) using proprietary tools and technology to using more of open technologies, (vii) moving from use of copyrighted learning resources to open educational resources, (viii) moving from fixed assessment approach to recognition of prior

learning and new forms of authentic assessments, (ix) locally recognized credentials to globally recognized credentials, and last but not the least (x) high cost to affordable education.

A hypothetical distance education provider may undertake a self-assessment and the visual diagram may provide a picture that will keep changing as the institution makes progress toward more openness and address the global educational challenges.

While the devil is in the detail and I urge you to rethink openness in your practice, I think openness is broadly about fairness, flexibility and freedom. Fairness is about equity and inclusion – making learning accessible to all; flexibility is about opportunities – anytime, anywhere, any-media; and freedom is about sharing learning resources, collaborating and co-creating knowledge for development. Let's rethink our current practice.

Thank you for your kind attention.