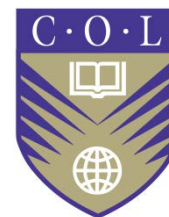


The Impact of Online and Distance Learning on Higher Education and Training



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Greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning. I must apologise for not being there personally but since my topic today is online and distance education, this is a good demonstration of how technology allows me to make a 'virtual' appearance. I am grateful to Dr Michael Bradshaw and the organisers for giving me this opportunity.

But first let me introduce you to my organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning or COL. COL, is an intergovernmental organisation established by the Commonwealth Heads of Government. We are based in Vancouver, Canada and have a regional office for Asia in Delhi. What does COL do? COL's mission is to help Commonwealth countries to harness the potential of distance education and technology to enhance access to quality learning that leads to development.

Every year, the Commonwealth identifies a theme. This year it is 'A Young Commonwealth'. And significantly, 60% of the population of the Commonwealth is under the age of 30. In 2013, 75 million youth were unemployed, accounting for over 12% of global unemployment. This magnitude of youth unemployment has resulted in a greater demand for knowledge and skills that can lead to livelihoods.

As governments and policy-makers seek to expand the coverage of education, reduce costs and improve standards, it is clear that alternative approaches are needed. In the current economic climate, it is unlikely that traditional brick and mortar solutions will be the only viable option. As a response to the growing need for affordable quality education, there is an increasing demand for distance and online learning.

The rising demand for HE has given rise to a range of new types of providers – private, cross-border, online and distance education institutions. The success of the Open University in the UK captured the imagination of policy-makers around the world, but particularly in developing countries.

In the Commonwealth, there were only 10 open universities in 1988, when COL began its operations. Today the number has tripled and millions of students are able to access higher education at affordable costs. The University of West Indies has a strong Open Campus using open and distance learning since 1948^[1]. In 2013, the Open Campus served nearly 20,000 students from 17 Caribbean countries, 4000 of whom were studying online^[2]. This is a major development, and the increasing access to the internet and mobile telephony provides us opportunities to meet the educational needs in the region.

The growth of technologies, has given rise to an increasing trend towards online learning, especially in the developed countries, where the distinction between face to face and distance learning is disappearing. In 2014, over 33.5 per cent of all US HE students were taking at least one online course. Latin America has nearly 15 per cent online enrolments, with Brazil and Colombia registering the highest growth. The impact of online and distance learning on HE has been very significant since it has thrown open the ivory towers and led to the massification of HE.

Has this massification resulted in a dilution of quality? In 2012, the Open University of the UK ranked first in student satisfaction. Earlier, the OU UK ranked fifth among the 100 universities surveyed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK, and was one rank higher than Oxford University. There is enough evidence to prove that distance learning can be of equivalent quality. As quoted in a recent Economist, William G Bowen a former president of Princeton tested online courses in several universities and found that students learned as much as with conventional teaching in three quarters of the time, with cost-reductions of 19-57%. The impact on HE will be more flexibility for the learner, a reduction in the completion time of various programmes and affordable costs. However, in many developing countries online and distance learning are still considered a second chance option. Therefore, HE institutions will have to put in place rigorous quality assurance mechanisms. Not only will institutions have to pay greater attention to the quality of online and distance learning provision but they will also have to dispel negative perceptions through evidence-based advocacy.

Distance education around the world has already demonstrated that access can be increased and costs can be cut. For example, a study showed that the annual cost per student at the Korean National Open University is US\$186, compared with nearly \$3,000 for a campus student. A distance learning programme in teacher education costs one third of what the same student would pay for the University of Nairobi's BEd programme. Georgia Tech is offering its prestigious Masters in Computer Science course as a MOOC – because of which its existing cost of \$40,000 is being reduced to \$7,000, affordable even in many developing countries.

As we know, massive open online courses or MOOCs are a form of distance and online learning. Started at the University of Manitoba in 2008, MOOCs gained traction in the Ivy League institutions of the United States and have resulted in major consortia of the top research universities on both sides of the Atlantic: Coursera, EdX and Udacity in the US with FutureLearn led by the OU UK and there are many others around the world. The implication for HE is that universities will no longer be able to work in isolation but will have to reach out and work collaboratively with other institutions. The impact for learners will be that they will have many more choices for determining which courses to follow and with which institution. The institutions which teach may not necessarily be the institutions that provide the qualifications. There will be more cross-border mobility of learners, for which policy makers, will need to adopt transnational or regional qualifications frameworks.

The MOOC effect in reaching large numbers has been unexpected. The computer science (CS) course offered by Udacity was signed up for by 270,000 people, many more than the total number of learners who aspire to do CS courses in nearly 3,000 degree granting institutions in the USA. Research has shown that many people who sign up for MOOCs already have diplomas or degrees. MOOCs can offer lifelong learning opportunities at scale to a global constituency.

This September, the international community will agree on Sustainable Development Goals that will shape our collective agenda from 2015 to 2030. The proposed goal on education is to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. The HE community can contribute to the achievement of this goal by using online and distance learning to reach out to

marginalised communities with quality learning that leads to livelihoods. In many of the developing Commonwealth countries, we are still confronted with many divides: on the basis of gender, location and access to technology. Therefore, any technology that we adopt must keep the special circumstances of our learners in mind.

Our young people must be trained in the skills they need for employment and entrepreneurship. A McKinsey report points out that ‘employers, education providers and youth live in parallel universes’, and very often these worlds do not meet. Over 50 per cent of the youth surveyed did not believe that their secondary education would lead to employment. Similarly about 50 per cent of the employers did not think that the new graduates had the skills to be hired even at the entry level. There seems to be a disconnect between what we teach in our schools and universities and what is required by the job market.

For example, four key strategies have been identified to get Europe’s youth into work. One is to invest in innovations so that education becomes more affordable and accessible. This has been the fundamental premise underlying distance and online provision. Two, bring together young people, employers and education providers, something that educational providers need to focus on; three, build enabling structures; and four, share the practices that work. Context is always important and the models that we adopt must be ‘fit for purpose’.

In conclusion, how can online and distance learning address the challenge of skills development, gainful employment and livelihoods? One, by transforming the curriculum to make education relevant for the needs of the twenty first century; two, by harnessing appropriate technologies to address the needs of youth. The rise of low cost mobile devices is making this a real option in the developing world. And three, by ensuring there is a convergence between the needs of the labour market and the education provided to our young people.

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

^[1] <http://www.open.uwi.edu/about/history>

^[2] http://www.open.uwi.edu/sites/default/files/UWI_OpenCampus_2012-2013.pdf