

# New Path for Open Universities: Responding to Global Issues



**2 November 2022**

35<sup>th</sup> Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) Annual Conference  
Jeju-do, Korea

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It is a pleasure to be here in person and I must thank the President Kosong Hwan, Korean National Open University and Prof Ojat Dorajat, President AAOU for the invitation. The Commonwealth of Learning has been a consistent supporter of AAOU and has watched it grow from strength to strength. It is a dynamic and lively forum that provides for an open exchange of ideas and experiences to enhance the quality of education in Asia. My presentation today will address the theme of the conference 'Opening a New Path for Open Universities: responding to global issues'.

But first let me congratulate our host institution KNOU as it celebrates 50 years of service as a mega university, providing high quality multi-media instruction and contributing to human resource development in the country. During the pandemic, it used its state of the art distance education system and innovative approaches to keep the doors of learning open.

I will begin my presentation by looking at three global issues and the implications they have on the way we teach and learn. I will then look at the status of ODL in the Commonwealth today and the emerging trends. In conclusion, I will outline how open universities must refresh, rethink and redesign their policies and processes to embark on a new path through a culture of innovation.

The world is confronted with several issues today but I will focus on three—the Covid-19 pandemic, SDG4 and the climate crisis—all of which have a direct link to the education sector.

Three years ago, no one could have predicted the pandemic or foreseen its magnitude. As we know, Covid-19 has caused the biggest disruption of education in human history where over 95% students worldwide were impacted.

The closure of campuses affected more than 220 million higher education students worldwide.

Most institutions had to pivot to emergency remote teaching. Many did not have adequate technology infrastructure. The mobility of international students plummeted with countries losing large revenues from student fees. Budget cuts were imposed by governments—research reliant on practical work and external collaborations suffered most.

A survey conducted in Europe found that most teachers live-streamed lectures synchronously. A large number of teachers also used asynchronous approaches by sending pre-recorded videos and audio lectures.

A study in the US and Canada revealed that over 50% of teachers required help with supporting remote students, needed access to digital materials and wanted assistance with technology.

Students too suffered in various ways--and half of them felt that their performance had declined. Many faced challenges relating to technology tools and connectivity and most felt an impact on their psychological well-being.

The pandemic has deepened the existing learning crisis. A study in the Netherlands, records a learning loss of about 3 percentile points with higher losses among students from less-educated homes. But was it only a learning loss? Amidst this learning loss was a 'learning gain' where over and above the curriculum, both teachers and learners learnt to be resilient, managed their time better, acquired basic computer skills to learn and collaborated on various social media platforms.

Another silver lining was the global acceptance of distance and online learning. It would have taken years of advocacy to achieve the overnight transition to remote learning. A recent study in the UK found that the majority of higher education students rated the quality of online learning as excellent. The preference for online courses has increased from 9% in 2020 to 29% in 2022, according to an Educause survey.

The pandemic led to innovations where ODL was harnessed for poverty alleviation. The Open University of China trained 50,000 villagers in rural areas for livelihoods.

The COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery project trained over 150,000 Commonwealth citizens, many of them first-time online learners. Establishing help-desks to provide learner support and counselling resulted in higher completion rates. Since ODL is a viable option, how can it be effectively deployed by open universities for livelihoods?

No one was prepared for the disruption caused by Covid-19—preparing for the uncertainties that lie ahead, how can OU's become resilient and ready for any eventuality?

In 2015, the global community identified 17 sustainable development goals which were expected to be achieved by 2030. Even before the pandemic struck, the world was trailing on most targets—this progress has been further stalled.

SDG 4 aspires to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all by 2030.

One target relating to tertiary education is to ensure 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?

OECD countries, of which Korea is one, are way ahead the rest of the world in providing tertiary education—the GER in Korea being 98%—in 11 OECD countries the numbers of students will continue to grow but 13 countries are experiencing stability or declining growth.

How can we fast track progress towards SDG 4? UNESCO has proposed a five point agenda for achieving this target. 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.

The second target relating to tertiary education calls for ensuring that learners acquire the knowledge and skills for sustainable development, by developing global citizens who promote peace and non violence. To what extent are open universities actively engaged in the achievement of SDGs? Let us look at some examples.

UNISA offers an ‘environmental awareness responsibility’ module to green the curriculum. It also has earmarked funding for SDG-based research.

The OU UK has joined the UN Global Compact, promotes research on sustainable development, is developing a strategic plan to make SDGs relevant to staff and students and develops reports to monitor progress towards achieving SDGs at the national level.

Anadolu University also offers a course on ‘Communication for the SDGs’ and has launched a design competition to encourage students to engage with the SDGs

How can SDGs contribute to OUs? By signing up for the SDG’s OUs are considered a ‘responsible university’, have a higher impact and have a platform for wider partnerships for collaboration. OUs can in turn advance the SDG’s through knowledge, innovations and create a cadre of leaders for successful implementation.

How can OUs develop global citizens who contribute to peace and prosperity for the people and the planet?

The third major issue of our times is climate change.

Last year in British Columbia, the location of COL headquarters, we witnessed an unprecedented rise in temperatures to almost 50 degrees C. British Columbia also experienced vast flooding and forest fires. Recent reports have found that humans are the primary cause for the adverse changes to the planet’s ecosystem. Since we are responsible for the current climate crisis, what is it that we need to do to mitigate the impact and prevent future climate-related disasters?

How does the climate crisis effect the education sector? The tsunami in Tonga and the floods in Pakistan have disrupted education yet again with entire schools destroyed or irreparably damaged, leading to thousands of displaced students, unable to continue their 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?

COL recently brought out a document: Transforming Education for Climate Action: Report to Commonwealth Ministers of Education. This report provides a road map for how ministers of education can climate proof education systems, implement a green learning agenda that builds skills for blue and green economies, and promote education for climate action.

The recommendations of this report also focus on the important issues of quality, equity, and justice. In many countries girls are more vulnerable to climate change and disasters. One impact of the climate crisis has been to bring attention to climate justice and to recognise the need for providing equitable access to women and girls in STEM subjects.

The crisis has led to research in whether adopting distance and online learning can promote environmental sustainability. The Open University, 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 face-to-face group.

It is clear that each one of us must change our behaviours and take action to join global efforts to mitigate the adverse impact of climate change. As open universities how can we raise awareness and inspire action through climate literacy and research?

Let us now turn to the status of ODL in the Commonwealth and the new paths being forged. COL recently commissioned several reports that provide interesting findings.

The Commonwealth, which has 56 Member States, have 33 dedicated open universities, with the maximum number in Asia.

Data from 28 open universities of the Commonwealth shows a decreasing trend in enrolment 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 (5 face to face and 14 online in 2017). This indicates that open universities are becoming multimodal and that there is an increasing convergence between distance and campus learning.

A recent COL report on India refers to 17 open universities and 110 dual mode institutions. The overall GER in higher education is 29% with these ODL institutions accounting for 11% of all tertiary enrolments. The government plans to increase the GER to 35 % by 2030 where ODL will have a key role to play. What will OUs need to do to achieve this? They will have to move from being mega universities to becoming giga universities—this becoming possible through using MOOC platforms and providing robust learner support. The govt has sponsored a MOOC platform Swayam which also offers free quality online resources.

In addition to increasing access, OUs also provide equity by reaching women and persons in remote rural areas as data indicates. However, OUs are only reaching less than 1% of persons with disabilities. A targeted approach is needed if we are to become more inclusive. There is an increasing emphasis on quality with this being regulated by the University Grants Commission.

The report makes several recommendations to forge a new path for ODL institutions in India—these include integrating employability into the curriculum, adopting innovative assessments, using micro-credentials to make learning more flexible, and strengthening digital infrastructure and connectivity

The report on Nigeria states that 17 dual mode universities offer ODL programmes in the country. In addition, the National Open University of Nigeria, a mega university has a national presence with an extensive network of study centres including in correctional facilities, where 100% fee waiver is provided.

In order to open up access, ODL students can enter tertiary education without having to undergo the mandatory test offered by the Joint Matriculation Board. 45% of the students enrolled are women and the quality is regulated by the National Universities Commission.

This report too recommends the adoption of new ways of assessment, offering micro credentials for lifelong learning, providing courses for employability and reaching out to disadvantaged groups.

The University of South Africa was the first university in the world to offer distance education in 1946. In addition, there are ten universities which also offer ODL. UNISA is a mega university and one third of all higher education students in the country are distance learners.

A survey conducted to gauge the impact of Covid-19 in ODL institutions, found that a large number of students had to share devices and respondents did not believe that online learning offered equitable opportunities for learning including for persons with disabilities.

Here again the report recommends the need for reaching out to disadvantaged groups. It believes that national level interventions are required to provide access to devices and connectivity. At the same time it lays an emphasis on cybersecurity, cyber safety and data privacy.

What are the emerging trends common to these institutions? There is a blurring of boundaries between face to face and distance learning and an increasing use of online learning. Because of the pandemic experience, there is a recognition of revisiting assessment methods and strengthening quality. The emphasis is not just on access but also on human resource development.

Within the context of these institutions, what is the new path for open universities? Let these challenges become the opportunity for us to refresh, rethink and redesign our policies and practices.

The UN Transforming Education Summit held in September recognised the crisis in education and prepared a roadmap for transforming education by taking these actions as a matter of priority: addressing the learning loss; promoting equity and inclusion, achieving digital transformation, reviewing curricula and pedagogies and supporting psycho-social well-being of staff and students.

The pandemic created a momentum for self-directed learning. How can we build on this experience to create an ecosystem that promotes lifelong learning for all? Simply reforming current education systems will not be enough. Countries will need to continually skill and reskill their workforce, both young and old, throughout their lives.

Open universities already have a history of providing lifelong learning. Some of the mission statements already express a commitment to lifelong learning, as you can see in the case of the Open University of Malaysia, Sukkhothai Thamathirat Open University and the Open University of Sri Lanka.

Providing access to large numbers was one of the key contributions of open universities. It is imperative to prepare learners for employability. This will require a balance between theory and practice; a focus on hard as well as soft skills, a curriculum that addresses the needs of the labour market.

To create a higher education system that is responsive to the market needs and future requirements, it is necessary to look at the different stages of the employability pathway and to re-think our policies and practices.

As the climate crisis assumes greater urgency, key sustainability concepts need to be integrated into the curriculum. This would mean adopting a green learning agenda. This agenda would focus on developing the skills for green jobs that would help make the transition to a low carbon economy; green life skills for a more sustainable future and skills for a green transformation that addresses social justice.

How do we redesign our pedagogy and make it more fit for purpose? Recent research supports the call for blended approaches to teaching and learning. Learners want engagement and instant feedback.

Formal assessments and proctoring systems suffered major setbacks during the pandemic—where institutions adopted innovative approaches to build flexible models and make assessments more authentic. AI-based assessment constantly provides feedback to learners, teachers and parents about how the students learn, the support they need and the progress they are making towards their learning goals. Micro-credentials are leading to shorter, just-in-time courses that can be taken at one's own pace or time.

Open universities need to redesign learner support by integrating the psycho-social dimension and paying greater attention to the well-being of staff and students. Learning analytics have helped to provide personalised learning and improvements in learning outcomes.

OUs typically wanted to be like campus institutions. Today campus institutions are looking at how to offer effective distance learning. It is time for OUs to assume a leadership position in forging new paths. Opening new paths for OUs will require a culture of innovation within the institution. Innovations happen when stakeholders such as parents, teachers and the labour market are involved. Fostering their participation would enable the transformation of creativity into innovation.

As we know, innovations are not about technology alone--they can relate to products, processes, models, methods—even external relations and partnerships.

Technology is leading to various innovations in teaching and learning. But technology by itself is an invention. It is only when technology is ‘domesticated’ according to specific needs and contexts, that innovations happen.

We also need to ask—innovations for whom and innovations for what? Its not enough to have an innovative pilot project—how can we achieve scale? How ethical are our innovations and what will be the impact on people and the planet?

A new path for OUs will require an innovation mindset. One element of this would be to regard every challenge as an opportunity. Another would be to take risks and learn from failures. Finally, we need to adopt collaboration and sharing as a strategy. Which is why platforms such as AAOU are so important.

I thank you for your attention.