Navigating Institutional Diversity through the TEL COL project: challenges and opportunities

Romeela Mohee[1], Rubina Rampersad[2], Anjusha Durbarry[3] and Tomal Kumar Chadeea[4]

[1]*Higher Education Commission, Mauritius*
[2]*University of Mauritius*
[3]*Higher Education Commission, Mauritius*
[4]*Open University of Mauritius*

Abstract

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) project, Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL), engaged six higher education institutions in Mauritius, each representing diverse cultural, institutional, and pedagogical contexts, to develop online and blended courses. While diversity enriched the project, it also introduced challenges such as disparities in institutional policies, variations in technological readiness, and differing levels of commitment to open education principles. This paper examines strategies to transform institutional diversity into opportunities for innovation and mutual learning. A survey conducted with participating institutions further explored the challenges and opportunities encountered, providing empirical insights into the dynamics of cross-institutional collaboration. The diversity of institutional contexts offered fertile ground for generating innovative, context-sensitive solutions. The project fostered resilience and adaptability, emphasising the importance of collaboration, flexibility, and shared ownership in addressing the complexities of TEL implementation. Tailored capacity-building workshops and mentorship programmes were designed to address institutional gaps while respecting each context's unique strengths. Training 100 academics and resulting in 88 ODL/OER courses, the project demonstrated that fostering collaboration demands more than overcoming technical barriers; it requires cultivating a shared identity, a collaborative mindset, and building a community of practice. The lessons learned offer valuable insights for future cross-institutional TEL initiatives, where diversity remains both a strength and a challenge.

Key words: Technology enhanced learning, community of practice and learning, institutional diversity, cross-institutional collaboration, inclusivity, resilience

1. Background

Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) has emerged as a transformative approach to Higher education, particularly in contexts where traditional delivery modes face challenges. Defined as the integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning (Kirkwood & Price, 2014), TEL is closely linked to the principles of Open Distance Learning (ODL) and the promotion of Open Educational Resources (OER). According to UNESCO 2024[1], digital innovation is

[1] https://www.unesco.org/en/digital-education/need-know

crucial for safeguarding education as a fundamental human right, especially as global crises and conflicts become more frequent. This underscored the urgent need to combine technology with human resources to build education systems that are inclusive, resilient, and flexible.

In March 2022, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Mauritius with the support of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) launched the TEL project, which aimed to establish a strong foundation for a sustainable community of practice in technology-enabled learning.

HEC has been instrumental in guiding five publicly funded higher education institutions, namely the University of Mauritius, University of Technology Mauritius, Université des Mascareignes, Open University of Mauritius and Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI) in developing institutional TEL policies. The Higher Education Commission (HEC), operating within the framework of the Higher Education Act (HE Act) 2017, is mandated to promote the development of higher education and research through equitable access, quality outcomes, efficient resource use, and innovation in Mauritius. Aligned with its mandate, HEC advanced a national Technology-Enabled Learning (TEL) strategy to support universities in integrating digital learning approaches. The Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE), which is a teacher training institute, has since been incorporated into the initiative, with a TEL policy already developed[2]. These six (6) institutions represent a diverse landscape in terms of their mandates, pedagogical approaches, technological readiness, and institutional cultures, which bring both opportunities and complexities to the TEL initiative[3][4]. Recognising this diversity, as revealed through the baseline study conducted for all the six institutions, the HEC has adopted a coordinated yet flexible approach to institutionalizing TEL that respects institutional autonomy while fostering shared goals.

Capacity building has been a cornerstone of the TEL initiative. More than 100 academic staff members from the six participating institutions have been trained in open and distance learning (ODL) methodologies and the effective use of open educational resources (OER) for course development. This extensive training effort led to the creation of 88 online and blended learning courses, significantly strengthening institutional capacities and contributing to the sustainable integration of digital learning practices within the Mauritian higher education landscape. In Small Island Developing States (SIDS) like Mauritius, TEL holds the potential to overcome geographical isolation, expand access to quality education, and address resource constraints.

Effective implementation of Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) requires more than infrastructure and policies. It also relies on developing collaborative professional cultures. Studies have shown that fostering collaborative learning environments, and equipping educators with the tools to effectively integrate digital technologies enhance teaching and learning outcomes (Jaipal-Jamani et al, 2015). Parrish and Sadera (2019) identify mentoring, communities of practice, and mutually beneficial partnerships as key models for enhancing teacher educators' technology competencies through professional development. These models

[2] https://oasis.col.org/entities/publication/81766ab5-24df-4f5d-8749-5e17139ce62f

[3] https://oasis.col.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/c02f684e-46ee-42c7-b543-74c5f6e35df8/content

[4] https://oasis.col.org/entities/publication/e596d523-9557-4ea2-9ae8-905f6baec87e

emphasize collaboration as an essential pedagogical strategy to support the application of learning for professional development. In the ever-changing field of educational technology, collaboration is especially vital (Uerz et al., 2018) and can occur in various formats, such as working with colleagues within the same institution or collaborating across different institutions (Gondwe, 2021). List and Sorcinelli (2018), along with Yun et al (2016), examined the effects of faculty-initiated mutual mentoring programmes. Although their research primarily emphasized leadership development, the model also demonstrates promise for driving change in technology integration.

In this context, Communities of Practice (CoPs) emerge as a complementary and increasingly recognised approach in higher education for fostering scholarly teaching and learning enhancement. By reinforcing the social and situated nature of learning (Percy & Beaumont, 2008), CoPs offer a powerful model of professional development that is grounded in collegiality, collaboration, and sustained interpersonal engagement (McDonald, 2012). Together, these collaborative frameworks strengthen educators' capacity to integrate technology meaningfully into their practice. This is further supported by the findings of Guberman et al. (2021), which demonstrate how inter-institutional CoPs promote expansive learning, facilitating the co-creation of new knowledge and transformative changes in practice. Different positions held by participants within their institutions enabled coordinated improvements across individual, organisational, and national levels, highlighting the far-reaching impact of well-structured CoPs.

Building sustainable communities of learning and practice has become increasingly important in promoting innovation and resilience within higher education. While institutional diversity posed challenges, such as disparities in policies, technological readiness, and varying commitments to open education, it also created opportunities to foster a collaborative learning community. The project strengthened professional networks across institutions through carefully designed capacity-building workshops, mentorship programs, and the development of open and distance learning (ODL) and open educational resources (OER) courses. This paper examines how the TEL project leveraged institutional diversity to build a resilient, inclusive, and ongoing community of practice, offering insights for future cross-institutional initiatives aiming to harness diversity as a driver of innovation.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a case study methodology, complemented by a mixed-methods approach. The case study design allows for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon within its real-life context, while the mixed-methods approach enables the integration of both qualitative and quantitative data to enhance the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

2.2 Research Questions

The study is guided by four overarching research questions:

> ***RQ1:*** *How can institutional diversity help drive innovation and shared learning in cross-institutional TEL projects in higher education?*
>
> ***RQ2:*** *How do different policies and levels of technology readiness affect how joint TEL projects are carried out and what they achieve?*
>
> ***RQ3:*** *What strategies help build a shared identity and collaborative mindset among diverse institutions involved in ODL and OER?*
>
> ***RQ4:*** *What are the key factors for creating successful communities of practice that use institutional diversity to support innovation and shared learning in TEL and OER?*

2.3 Data Collection, Sampling and Analysis

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining open-ended surveys and desk research. Surveys gather detailed insights from course developers, while desk research analyses institutional documents and literature to provide context and triangulate findings, including baseline reports from the six participating institutions.

Purposive sampling was employed to select institutional coordinators and two course developers per institution, as these individuals hold key roles in course design and project implementation.

Survey and interview responses were analysed thematically to identify key patterns, and quantitative data were examined using descriptive statistics. Findings from desk research were integrated to enrich the overall analysis.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study, with data handled and stored in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. Additionally, Generative AI tools, specifically OpenAI's ChatGPT, were used to support the preparation of this paper. This included assistance with data analysis, thematic synthesis, and drafting of text. The use of AI was limited to supporting the researcher’s work and did not replace critical interpretation or decision-making. The authors also assessed and addressed potential biases inherent in the AI-generated content.

3. Findings and Analysis

3.1 Participant Profile

The survey received responses from 27 participants across five higher education institutions. The Mahatma Gandhi Institute contributed the most responses (44%), followed by the Open University of Mauritius (37%). The University of Mauritius, University of Technology, and Université des Mascareignes each accounted for between 4% and 7%. Most respondents were Lecturers (63%), with Senior Lecturers making up 30%. In terms of experience with online or blended learning, 44% of participants reported limited exposure, while 37% had moderate experience. Although Lecturers formed the majority, many had relatively little experience in digital learning environments. Respondents represented a range of teaching experience, with 37% having 0–5 years, 11% with 6–10 years, and 26% each with 11–15 years and over 16 years of experience. In terms of gender, the group included 11 males and 16 females.

3.2 Perceptions of Institutional Diversity

Institutional diversity was a central theme in the TEL COL initiative, with participants drawn from multiple higher education institutions that differed in their mandates, capacities, and levels of TEL-preparedness. Survey responses reflected a strongly positive perception of this diversity's impact, with 22 out of 27 participants (81%) rating it as "*Very Positive*" as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Perceived Contribution of Institutional Diversity to the TEL COL Project

Institution	Not at all Positive	Slightly Positive	Moderately Positive	Very Positive	Extremely Positive
Mahatma Gandhi Institute	-	-	2 (7%)	10 (37%)	-
Open University of Mauritius	-	1 (4%)	-	9 (33%)	-
Université des Mascareignes	-	-	-	-	1 (4%)
University of Mauritius	-	-	-	2 (7%)	-
University of Technology, Mauritius	-	-	1 (4%)	1 (4)	-
Total	**-**	**1 (4%)**	**3 (11%)**	**22 (81%)**	**1 (4%)**

While most participants viewed institutional diversity very positively, a small number expressed "*Moderately Positive*" (11%), "*Slightly Positive*" (4%), or "*Extremely Positive*" (4%) opinions, indicating some held more nuanced perspectives. This diversity shaped the development of online and blended courses around three key themes: ***cross-institutional learning***, ***pedagogical adaptation***, and ***exposure to varied disciplinary contexts***. Respondents frequently mentioned learning from colleagues in different institutional settings, particularly in course design and the use of digital tools. For example, participants from the Mahatma Gandhi Institute highlighted how their course development evolved by adopting shared best practices, while Open University of Mauritius staff valued engaging with institutions at different stages

of technological readiness, which prompted them to rethink learner needs and infrastructure. These themes of collaboration and diversity also fostered ***innovation through co-creation***, ***technology transfer***, and ***creative problem-solving***, with participants citing joint efforts such as multimedia resource design and the exchange of digital teaching strategies as key outcomes.

3.3 Challenges of Diversity and Readiness

While institutional diversity can enrich collaboration, it may also introduce disparities in infrastructure, readiness, and access to resources. These differences are reflected in Table 2, which presents the TEL-preparedness of the participating institutions based on the baseline studies conducted at each institution.

Table 2

TEL Preparedness of the six Institutions

Institution	TEL Score
University of Mauritius	136: Established preparedness[5]
Open University of Mauritius	114: Developing preparedness[5]
University of Technology, Mauritius	99: Developing preparedness[5]
Université des Mascareignes	106: Developing preparedness[5]
Mauritius Institute of Education	102: Developing preparedness[6]
Mahatma Gandhi Institute	82: Limited preparedness[7]

Table 3 shows varied perceptions of how challenging institutional diversity was during the TEL COL project, with responses spread across the full spectrum from *"Not Challenging at All"* to *"Extremely Challenging"*.

Table 3

Perceived Challenge of Institutional Resources and Technological Disparities

Institution	Not Challenging	Slightly Challenging	Moderately Challenging	Very Challenging	Extremely Challenging
Mahatma Gandhi Institute	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	3 (11%)	6 (22%)	1 (4%)
Open University of Mauritius	2 (7%)	3 (11%)	5 (19%)	-	-
Université des Mascareignes	1 (4%)	-	-	-	-
University of Mauritius	-	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	-	-
University of Technology	-	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	-	-
Total	**4 (15%)**	**6 (22%)**	**10 (37%)**	**6 (22%)**	**1 (4%)**

Most participants found institutional diversity to be "*Moderately Challengin*g" (37%), with smaller numbers rating it as "*Very Challenging*" (22%) or "*Slightly Challenging*" (22%). Only

[5] https://oasis.col.org/entities/publication/e596d523-9557-4ea2-9ae8-905f6baec87e
[6] https://oasis.col.org/entities/publication/81766ab5-24df-4f5d-8749-5e17139ce62f
[7] https://oasis.col.org/entities/publication/79f5766b-34c6-4c82-b60b-2ffad0b91baf

one respondent described it as "*Extremely Challenging*" suggesting that while challenges existed, they were generally seen as manageable. Open-ended responses highlighted issues such as ***technological inequality***, ***infrastructure gaps***, and ***limited instructional support***. Institutions with fewer digital tools or underdeveloped platforms struggled to keep up with better-resourced partners. Participants from the Mahatma Gandhi Institute and Université des Mascareignes pointed to the lack of graphic design support, OER repositories, and blended learning infrastructure as key obstacles. In some cases, staff had to develop materials from scratch, causing delays and inconsistencies. These disparities affected ***collaboration***, ***content quality***, and the ***sense of equity*** within the project, with some respondents feeling dependent on more advanced institutions. However, a few noted that adaptive strategies and peer support helped overcome some of these challenges. Many of these concerns were also reflected in the baseline study reports.

3.4 Strategies that Fostered Collaboration

The success of cross-institutional initiatives often depends on the presence of strong support mechanisms and deliberate collaborative strategies. Table 4 shows that *"Support from Institutional Coordinators"* and *"COL Support through workshops and online facilitation"* received the most positive evaluations. Nearly half of all respondents rated these as "*Excellent"* (48%), with an additional 37% and 48%, respectively, rating them as "*Very Good"*. This suggests that both institutional leadership and external coordination were highly effective in anchoring collaborative efforts. Similarly, "*Continuous Mentorship by COL Resource Persons"* was also favourably received, with 74% of participants rating it as "*Excellent"* or "*Very Good"*, reinforcing the value of sustained external guidance.

Table 4

Participant Ratings of Strategies for Building Shared Identity and Collaboration During the TEL COL Project

Strategies	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
COL Support (F-to-F Workshop and Online Facilitation)	-	-	7 (26%)	13 (48%)	7 (26%)
Emphasis on OER	-	1 (4%)	8 (30%)	15 (56%)	3 (11%)
Continuous Mentorship by COL Resource Person	-	1 (4%)	6 (22%)	12 (44%)	8 (30%)
Inter-Institution Collaboration	1 (4%)	5 (19%)	11 41%)	9 (33%)	1 (4%)
Support from Institutional Coordinator	-	1 (4%)	3 (11%)	10 (37%)	13 (48%)

The focus on OER was well received, with 56% rating it "*Very Good*" and 30% "*Good*" showing it helped foster a shared project culture. Inter-institution collaboration was also viewed positively overall, though 19% rated it "*Fair*" and 4% "*Poor*" suggesting varying levels of engagement across institutions. Leadership by HEC and COL received strong approval, with six participants giving 5-star ratings. Participants highlighted workshops, peer learning, and a flexible project approach as key to building a shared sense of purpose. Structured sessions enabled alignment, while informal peer support encouraged collaboration. Despite some

challenges such as ***technological gaps***, ***institutional differences***, and ***conflicting priorities***, many were addressed through ***peer mentoring*** and ***flexibility***. These issues, also reflected in the baseline reports, affected the TEL-readiness of some institutions.

3.5 Sustainability and Long-Term Impact

Beyond the immediate outcomes of the TEL COL project, its long-term success hinges on whether a sustainable community of practice was formed. Table 5 shows that a majority of participants viewed the TEL COL project as having successfully established a sustainable community of practice, with 59% indicating this occurred *"Very much"* and another 37% selecting *"Moderately"*. This suggests a strong perception that the collaboration extended beyond short-term project goals. Institutions such as the Mahatma Gandhi Institute and the Open University of Mauritius accounted for the highest levels of positive response, with 9 and 6 participants, respectively, affirming strong sustainability.

Table 5

Perceptions of the Sustainability of the Community of Practice Established through the TEL COL Project

Institution	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very much	Completely
Mahatma Gandhi Institute	-	-	3 (11%)	9 (33%)	-
Open University of Mauritius	-	-	4 (15%)	6 (22%)	-
Université des Mascareignes	-	-	-	-	1 (4%)
University of Mauritius	-	-	2 (7%)	-	-
University of Technology, Mauritius	-	-	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	-
Total	**-**	**-**	**10 (37%)**	**16 (59%)**	**1 (4%)**

Smaller or less represented institutions, such as Université des Mascareignes, showed a more cautious stance, with the sole response from that institution rating the outcome as "*Completely*" possibly reflecting an atypical or uncertain view. Across the board, participants identified ***shared purpose***, ***peer support***, and a***ctive engagement*** as key to building strong, lasting collaboration. The creation of a National OER Repository[8] and hosting of modules on a shared platform was seen as a major achievement, reinforcing a collective sense of purpose. Many responses highlighted a culture of openness, mutual support, and informal knowledge-sharing as crucial to sustaining collaboration. Themes like ***mutual respect***, ***regular interaction***, and a ***collective focus on student welfare*** were also noted as foundations for effective partnerships. Peer support systems, teamwork during presentations, and informal exchanges helped build trust and continuity. For future TEL or OER projects, participants recommended ***structured collaboration mechanisms***, ***ongoing professional development***, and ***institutional pairing or clustering***, suggesting that mentorship and capacity-building between institutions with varying strengths would promote more balanced and equitable partnerships.

[8] https://oermu.uom.ac.mu/

4. Discussion and recommendations

The institutional baseline studies unveiled the institutional specificities very explicitly. Clear knowledge of the terrain and a non-horizontal collaboration ensured that differences were not being erased but reckoned with. Though the project was on technology, the institutions that had low TEL-preparedness were empowered to showcase their strength through their niche areas and then integrate technology.

The uniqueness of each institution was a catalyst to adapt and learn from each other. For instance, MGI, which initially scored low on TEL-preparedness, launched a compulsory six-month in-house training programme, drawing on expertise from institutions with more advanced TEL capabilities and tapping open access resources from the COL portal to ensure its academic staff could operate on a level playing field with their counterparts in other institutions for the next phase of the TEL project. They eventually successfully developed 17 OER courses in niche areas such as Asian Languages, classical music and folk. This achievement positioned MGI as an emerging leader in OER development within these specialised domains.

The project demonstrated that institutional diversity, when acknowledged and strategically harnessed, became a valuable asset for mutual learning, capacity building, and cross-pollination. It contributed to the creation of a dynamic local TEL/OER ecosystem, with each institution evolving as a centre of excellence in specific areas. For example, the University of Mauritius developed OER modules with cross-institutional applicability, including the "Introduction to Ayurveda Medicine" course, which was offered several times as a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) to both the public and international learners. The respondents to the survey in fact perceived diversity as a positive contribution to the project, auguring well for the project.

HEC played a central role in providing sustained support and oversight throughout the project. Collaboration was formalised through institutional agreements with each institution, and progress was rigorously monitored using project management tools and monitoring mechanisms. The training programme followed a structured approach, beginning with mandatory pre-workshop tasks, followed by face-to-face and online workshops facilitated by a COL consultant, and reinforced through ongoing mentoring to ensure timely and quality-assured module completion.

TEL Institutional Coordinators/TEL champions liaised with HEC and were responsible for monitoring their team progress and maintaining momentum. This peer-led, non-hierarchical model fostered a collaborative and sustainable environment. Coordinator adapted implementation strategies to their institution’s culture: for instance, MGI and UTM adopted a structured, classroom-like format led by coordinators or emerging TEL champions, whereas UoM preferred one-to-one progress meetings. Thus, while guided by a common framework from HEC, each institution tailored its approach based on internal organisational culture.

Various project management tools and file management strategies for monitoring progress and QA rubrics were used to ensure successful completion of this project.

The findings suggest several key implications for policy and practice in TEL, OER and ODL:

- **Institutional Context Matters**: Effective collaboration depends on understanding each institution's unique context. Baseline assessments were crucial in guiding tailored implementation strategies.
- **Empowerment over Uniformity:** Instead of enforcing a uniform approach, the project enabled institutions to develop context-specific strategies. Those with lower TEL-readiness were empowered to contribute based on their strengths, promoting equity.
- **Strategic Coordination and Delegation:** A balanced model combining HEC's central oversight, COL's training support, and local leadership by TEL coordinators ensured accountability while respecting institutional autonomy. Institutional commitments were formalised through agreements with HEC.
- **Sustainable CoP Development:** Setting a common goal of developing and populating the National OER Repository played a key role in fostering a cohesive and sustainable Community of Practice.
- **Flexible Training Models:** While training content was standardised, mentoring and implementation were adapted to fit each institution's culture.

5. Limitations

Despite its valuable insights, this study has a few limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, with only 27 participants across six institutions, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. The perspectives captured may not fully reflect the broader experiences of all academic staff involved in the TEL COL project. Second, without longitudinal data, it was not possible to fully evaluate the long-term sustainability and impact of the community of practice. Future research could benefit from larger, more diverse samples, longitudinal tracking, and triangulation with observational or performance-based data to strengthen the evidence base.

6. Conclusion

The TEL COL project exemplifies a successful model of inter-institutional collaboration within a context of institutional diversity. It demonstrates that differences in readiness, resources, and strategic priorities can be harnessed as strengths when guided by inclusive frameworks, strong leadership, and coordinated support. The collaborative creation of a National Open Educational Resources Repository represents not only a major achievement for Mauritius but also positions the country as an emerging contributor to the global OER movement, particularly in specialised domains. Ultimately, the TEL COL project offers a replicable model for similar initiatives worldwide and makes a meaningful contribution to the evolving scholarship on Technology-Enabled Learning (TEL), Open and Distance Learning (ODL), and open education.

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