

# Putting Innovation at the Heart of ODL: What are the Possibilities?



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It is a pleasure to be here in person at the 2023 International Conference on Open and Innovative Education and I must thank Dr KC Li and the organising team for the invitation. As a distance educator, I have long been familiar with the pioneering role of the Hong Kong Metropolitan University, which has evolved and grown from a dedicated open university to a dual-mode institution that continues to meet the changing needs of its stakeholders. In addition, ICOIE has over the years become a valuable global platform for promoting research in open, distance and technology-enabled learning. My topic today is ‘Putting Innovation at the heart of ODL: what are the possibilities’?

I will first look at the context in which we operate today followed by an exploration of the kind of innovations that we see in education. This will lead to the question of whether open and distance learning (ODL) is innovative. I will then focus on the status of research in ODL to gauge the emphasis on innovation. In conclusion, I will outline how we need to proactively nurture a culture of innovation to refresh, rethink and redesign ODL policies and processes for transforming education.

But first the context. We live in a disruptive age, where change is happening faster than ever before and in more unpredictable ways than we can imagine. Three years ago, no one could have predicted the pandemic or foreseen its magnitude. Technology is growing faster than anyone can keep pace with—presenting exciting opportunities and unprecedented risks. We are encountering the increasing impact of the climate crisis in our daily lives.

The world is reeling under recession, learning to cope with phenomenal developments in technology, and the changing nature of jobs. The jobs that exist today were unheard of ten years ago and the jobs of the future will need to be aligned to the green and blue economies. Life expectancy has gone up and those born after 1997 could live to be a hundred. How can the education sector respond?

Recognising the magnitude of the crisis, the UN Secretary General convened the ‘Transforming Education Summit 2022’ in New York to urge leaders to invest in equitable access to quality education for all by harnessing the potential of technologies. Let us look at the five key issues identified.

The first was to address learning loss. 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.

The second issue relates to equity and inclusion. Even within OECD countries, huge disparities exist between students who go to privileged schools and those who study at disadvantaged institutions in terms of access to computers, the Internet and a quiet place to study at home.

In the last six months, we have seen an explosion of innovations in generative AI. We need to look at generative AI from the perspective of the teacher, the learner, the institution and the context. An ITU report 2022, indicates that while 60% of the global population uses the Internet, in Africa, the percentage drops to 40. The same pattern is visible in the ownership of mobile phones. In terms of gender equality, women are 12% less likely to own a mobile phone than men. How do we ensure that our teachers can harness the potential of ChatGPT which can become a powerful personal assistant?

The fourth is about reviewing curricula and pedagogies to become more relevant to the needs of the 21st century. This would involve moving from digital literacy to AI fluency. Pedagogical considerations would require focusing on 'learnability' Learnability is the desire and ability to grow and adapt one's skills knowledge and values on a continuous basis to remain employable productive and sustainable in an ever-changing world—it requires learning unlearning and relearning.

What has emerged from the pandemic experience is the need to support the psycho-social well-being of the students. As a study indicates, students who participated in social emotional learning scored 13 percentile points higher than those students who didn't. This indicates the need to focus on SEL in teaching and learning. Today we are in a crisis situation and crisis generates creativity. How can we convert this creativity into innovation in education?

Does education foster innovation?

Measuring innovation in education over nearly a decade, an OECD study found that several innovations were implemented relating to pedagogy, assessments, inclusion and teacher development. But what was significant was that higher levels of innovation led to improved learning outcomes and more satisfied teachers. This was well before Covid-19.

During the pandemic, both ministries and institutions had to respond to an unprecedented situation. Radio and TV saw a second coming in many developing Commonwealth countries, digital platforms and OER were provided, free SIM cards were made available to parents and alternative assessments and exams were held. How can innovation become part of the DNA of education?

Let us look at the four types of innovation —incremental, disruptive, architectural and radical. A specific type of innovation is dependent on two factors: demand and technology and framework. First, does the innovation create a new demand, or address the existing demand in education? Second, does the innovation use a new technology and framework or an existing technology and framework?

The first is incremental innovation which addresses existing demand and uses existing technologies and frameworks to improve services and practices. For example, mobile phones, cameras and even community radio were used during the pandemic to keep the doors of learning open.

Disruptive innovation happens when an existing demand is addressed through the use of new technologies or frameworks. One example is the move from campus based to distance learning when there was a need to democratize education for all.

The third is architectural innovation which addresses new demands by using existing technologies or frameworks. The new demand for MOOCs was met by using the existing technologies that were already available for elearning. Similarly lifelong learning can be addressed by implementing andragogy and heutagogy.

Radical innovations take place when new technologies or frameworks are used to create or reach a new demand. Today there is a demand to reach 773 million illiterates globally with literacy programmes. Another is to train 15 million additional teachers in SSA by 2030 – where are the radical innovations to reach these constituencies? If we review the field of education, we mostly find incremental rather than radical innovation.

Is ODL a disruptive innovation?

Clayton Christensen defines disruptive innovation in business as a process whereby a smaller entity with fewer resources is able to successfully challenge established players and displace incumbent businesses by addressing a specific need that had hitherto not been addressed.

What are the characteristics of disruptive innovation? First, it is a process not a product or service. It is usually regarded as having lower quality in the beginning. It takes time to challenge and disrupt established businesses or organisations. New models emerge as a result. But we must also remember that all disruptive innovations do not succeed.

This diagram shows how disruptions take place in business. The new product enters the market at the bottom to satisfy the needs of low-end customers. This need is not being addressed by the existing dominant players in the market. The new entrants improve their performance and quality over a period of time and eventually dislodge the dominance of the big players.

Using Christensen's disruptive innovation model in higher education, we find open and distance learning (ODL) as the innovation at the bottom of the pyramid that continues to challenge mainstream face-to-face higher education. Campus institutions have become mainstream over 900 years of existence and the state, students and parents continue to sustain the demand for them. However, ODL began to cater to those who were left outside mainstream higher education. ODL as an innovation is now manifesting itself as online and blended learning and MOOCs, especially during the pandemic.

Disruptions emerge when mainstream providers fail to cater to the needs of a learning society. These are supported by innovations in technology and give rise to a new breed of providers. As we have

seen, distance and online learning have grown and evolved over the last fifty years, keeping pace with and taking advantage of various technologies.

Prof Taylor's five generations of distance learning models sums up the evolution of ODL from correspondence education to multi-media to online provision.

Traditionally, open and distance learning has always adopted a blended approach keeping in mind issues of social justice. Research shows that blended learning is more effective in developing countries (John Baggaley). The role of ODL becomes even more important as the global community seeks to transform education by providing quality learning opportunities to all.

This includes persons with disabilities. Studies show that more PWD join ODL institutions as they don't need to travel to campus. ODL is more flexible and offers content in various formats so learners can read, watch or listen to lectures. ODL provides a degree of anonymity where students with disabilities can interact with professors and peers without feeling discriminated. How can we invest in innovations to make education more accessible and inclusive?

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.

As people live longer, they will need opportunities for learning. China seems to recognise this and one manifestation is the newly established National University for the Aged located in the Open University of China. ODL institutions have always aspired to 'parity of esteem' with campus institutions but with the global acceptance of ODL, it is time to innovate and play a leadership role in transforming education. What will be the role of research?

Let us review some of the ODL research over the past four decades. Does it fuel innovation?

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.

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.

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

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.

A recent study on the critical issues in ODL highlight the need for longitudinal research, socio-cultural sensitivity, more attention to reaching the disadvantaged and a need to revisit ODE theories.

Another study on AI in online distance education highlights the value of AI in promoting adaptive and personalised systems, predicting student behaviours and the need to ensure a human-centred and ethical approach.

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.

In the last four years, some of the most engaged themes have been: how OER can be best leveraged to support technology enabled learning, a strong interest in the concept of learning for development and the ways in which technology can be harnessed in innovative ways to address the needs of different contexts.

According to my colleague Dr Tony Mays, the common themes that emerge from the most recent issues are: use of appropriate technology tailored for context is a recurring theme, but we need to keep thinking about the why (learning for development), the how (technology-enabled), and to evaluate what we are achieving (lessons of experience and research) in order to close the feedback loop into improved practice.

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? Does the use of educational technology guarantee innovation? Do we see much discourse on innovation theories? Or the carbon footprint of ODL?

What are the opportunities for research in the use of technologies to take ODL 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 teaching assistants for providing personalized support to thousands of learners.

What do we need to strengthen innovation going forward? ODL institutions need to align more closely with the needs of their societies and promote innovations that lead to sustainable development. Creativity enables the workforce to generate new and original ideas, while innovation enables them to turn the ideas created into practical solutions for complex problems. It is time for us to refresh, rethink and redesign our policies and practices.

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.

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

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?

Is it possible to develop innovators? In their book *The Innovators' DNA*, Dyer, et al identify innovation skills that can be learned: questioning, observing, networking and experimenting —these skills can generate new ideas and promote out of the box thinking. How can we ensure that these skills are integrated in teaching and learning?

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? Lifelong learning includes the whole spectrum of formal non-formal and informal learning. 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 our mission statements 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 higher education to large numbers was one of the key contributions of open universities. Providing access is no longer enough so we need to rethink this role. It is imperative to prepare learners to be employable. 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. The orientation will change to providing certification based on proven competence rather than the number of hours attended.

As the climate crisis assumes greater urgency, we need to integrate key sustainability concepts 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? Since we are no longer testing only knowledge but also skills and competencies, we need new ways of assessing performance. Openness and flexibility requires that we recognise prior learning and make it possible for learners to transfer their credits anytime anywhere. 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. 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.

ODL institutions need to redesign learner support by integrating psycho-social dimensions and paying greater attention to the well-being of staff and students. Technology hubs, learning analytics and chatbots can be deployed innovatively to improve learning outcomes.

If we need to put innovation at the heart of ODL, we need to develop 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.

I thank you for your attention.