

ODL 2020 and Beyond

16 October 2019



Video presentation at the 33rd Annual Conference
of the Asian Association of Open Universities, Lahore, Pakistan

Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Greetings to all distinguished colleagues and friends. The Commonwealth of Learning is proud to support this AAOU conference and I must thank Prof Melinda Bandalaria, Dr Nasir Naveed and the organisers for the opportunity to be ‘virtually’ present. Though I must say I miss not being at this year’s AAOU conference and that too in the beautiful city of Lahore. My topic today is ‘ODL in 2020 and beyond’ and I have prepared this with my colleague Dr Sanjaya Mishra.

In this presentation, I will first review the evolution of ODL and the different institutional models of open and distance learning that have emerged over the years. I will then share examples of how some institutions have been preparing for 2020 and conclude with some key areas that we need to focus on as we prepare for the world beyond 2020.

First, let us briefly touch on the evolution of ODL.

We speak of the fourth industrial revolution today—what has been the impact of these revolutions on ODL?

In the first industrial revolution when the steam engine was invented, higher education made a transition from being elite to one which anyone could aspire to. The second industrial revolution was marked by the assembly line and mass production, when it became possible to produce self-instructional booklets and offer correspondence courses. The rise of the computer and internet in the third revolution led to the rise of open and distance learning and open universities and today in the fourth revolution, marked by AI and Robotics, we have OER and MOOCs.

Using Christensen’s disruptive innovation model in higher education, we find open and distance learning (ODL) as the real innovation at the bottom of the pyramid that continues to challenge the mainstream face-to-face higher education. ODL as an innovation is now manifesting itself as online and blended learning. MOOC, another form of distance education, embraced by the top research universities is now challenging traditional ODL. ODL, the initial disruptor is being disrupted. How can we reclaim our leadership in innovation?

When COL first started operations in 1988, there were ten open universities in the Commonwealth. Three in Canada alone with just one in Africa.

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

invest in single-mode open universities. Most of were established in the 20th century, but even those being established in the 21st century are following the earlier industrial model.

As Otto Peters explains, the industrial model works through a division of labour, mass production and distribution and efficient planning and organisation. The world is changing rapidly—but are we?

Changing 4 jobs by the age of 32 is the new normal for young people. We need to focus is on skilling and reskilling learners for the uncertain world of work. Learners will need to move back and forth from academia to employment. This could give rise to networks of multi-versities. Micro-qualifications are becoming as important as degrees. In addition, the faculty will have to become lifelong learners to acquire the knowledge and skills in new modes of delivery and pedagogy. Are our universities prepared for these changes?

A Delphi survey was conducted recently to get the views of experts on what kind of universities will be needed in the future. The results of the survey suggested four possibilities: a future skills focus, a commitment to lifelong learning, multi-institutional pathways and personalisation of academic learning. Are ODL institutions thinking of these priorities?

Let us look at some models of ODL institutions over the last 50 years.

Asia has seen the greatest growth of single mode open universities. Many of these are mega universities with enrolments of over a 100,000. Allama Iqbal Open University, Indira Gandhi National Open University, Universitas Terbuka, University of the Philippines Open University, Open University of China are all mega universities that are making it possible to provide affordable access to millions of those who would otherwise not have entered higher education. The single mode open universities are still relevant today because of the large numbers that must be reached.

We have an even larger number of dual mode universities, some of which are mega institutions. The Open School of Delhi University has an annual enrolment of 150,000 students every year. In the US, the Babson Survey 2018 reported that 31.6% campus students were taking at least one distance course. This model normally uses the strengths of the existing faculty to reach more learners, and is increasingly seen as a viable business model for campus universities.

The Open University Malaysia is an interesting example of the consortium model, where 11 public universities are partners. This is a collaborative model where all participating institutions take ownership and share the benefits. COL's own Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), the Open Universities Australia and OER universitas are different versions of this model. The strength of the model is the power of the network, collaboration and sharing resources.

Because technology and the internet, many countries have started virtual universities. The Virtual University Pakistan has virtual campuses that offer blended learning opportunities to those who are not ready for a fully online provision. This is a very effective model for developing countries.

The Open University of Hong Kong is an example of an emerging model that uses multiple strategies to open up education including initiating campus provision and offering MOOCs.

Each model demonstrates a response to the needs of a particular context at a particular time. However, all models have five elements in common. These are content, delivery, recognition, flexibility and openness. Instead of developing courses from scratch, some institutions are using existing OER. Technology is being used to personalize learning through various delivery options. Some of these universities are going beyond formal credentials to recognize prior learning. The emphasis is on flexibility and on becoming truly open.

How are institutions preparing themselves for the needs of 2020 and beyond?

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 existing approaches. There is an increased pressure on Vice-Chancellors and Presidents to show results at minimal costs. Institutions must prove themselves as centres of excellence in research and at the same time produce employable graduates. How are the open universities responding?

The strategic plan of Athabasca University, Canada is entitled ‘Imagine: Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities’ and positions the institution as ‘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 Future Learn, its MOOC platform. It uses multiple media channels such as iTunes and You Tube to improve student support systems.

UNISA is becoming increasingly paperless by using OER, ebooks, etutors and ementors. It ensures that every student has access to a PC or tablet and the internet.

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 transforming its systems to integrate employability. Open University of Malaysia is using AI to develop chatbots for personalized tutoring.

What do all these institutions have in common? They are using technology and OER—building partnerships and collaborations, strengthening learner support and making use of data and hard evidence to drive teaching innovation and research.

What do we need to think about when we prepare for the C21?

As you know, the global community adopted the 17 SDGs of which SDG 4 aspires to ensure ‘inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all’ by 2030. This goal can be achieved with the significant contributions from the ODL community.

What kind of graduates are we developing? Are we producing lifelong learners who are ready for employment in the changing job market? Do they have a positive mindset for working with others? Are they responsible global citizens?

The C 21 open universities will not just be industrial as in the past but will also be networked institutions with increased emphasis on collaboration and sharing. We will need to revisit our institutional cultures and business models.

Institutional culture will depend on leadership and the extent to which we can motivate and inspire our staff to deliver results. New technologies can provide data for informed decision-making.

As practices change, so will our notions of quality. The focus of quality is now not just on inputs and processes but also on competencies, learning outcomes and the employability of our graduates.

Recent research supports the advantages of blended approaches. Learners want interactivity and instant feedback. We also need to guide learners to become self-directed and autonomous so that they are well prepared for learning throughout life.

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.

All of us need to invest more in learner support and technology can help us to a large extent. 24/7 online hubs and call centres can prove to be very helpful if they are run effectively. Learning analytics have helped to provide personalised learning and improvement in learning outcomes in many institutions.

Whatever model we adopt, let us ensure that our graduates have the three literacies that Robert Aoun proposes. First, the human literacy, prepares students to perform jobs that only human beings can do. Human literacy will help them to make ethical choices, equip them for social engagement through effective communication. Second, data literacy is essential in a world driven by data. Learners must be able to find meaning in the flood of information around us. Third, technological literacy is essential if we are to understand machines and their uses. Learners must be able to deploy software and hardware in order to maximize their powers to achieve and create. If we can equip our learners with these three literacies, we will be preparing them for 2020 and beyond.

Thank you for your attention.