Towards Resilient Skills Development Systems: Challenges & Opportunities

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World Bank Webinar on Skills Development during a Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities

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The COVID 19 crisis is forcing us to rethink the way we approach skills development. We have mostly associated skills development with a face to face situation and not really adopted alternative approaches. Now that the world has been forced to accept distance and technology enabled learning, what are the challenges and opportunities?

As you are aware, the Commonwealth of Learning or COL is an intergovernmental organisation with headquarters in Canada and works in 54 Commonwealth countries which span all regions of the world.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training.

In this presentation, I will first look at the Commonwealth context, share COL's response during the pandemic and conclude with how the challenges can be converted into opportunities.

First the context.

According to UNESCO, over 1.2 billion students, were unable to attend schools since the outbreak of the pandemic. At 15th May, there were 574 million students in the Commonwealth impacted by school closures and this includes TVET students.

As per an ILO-UNESCO survey regarding the impact of COVID 19, 90% of the respondents from 63 countries reported complete closure of TVET schools and centres (16 Apr, 2020). Another report by Victoria Levin et al indicates that TVET students in Kenya and Ghana come from lower socio-economic backgrounds as compared to their peers in general education and struggle more than them.

In addition to the learning crisis generated by the crisis is the added challenge of skilling and reskilling millions of migrants who have been suddenly displaced by the pandemic. How can the skills development sector achieve both speed and scale to respond to the unprecedented challenges?

The Commonwealth has a population of 2.4 billion with 60% of them under the age of 30. Youth unemployment in Commonwealth Member States is higher than the global average of 15%.

When the pandemic struck, the education and training sector was clearly not prepared and had to look for immediate solutions. Online provision was the preferred option for ensuring that students continued to learn. But how many students have access to electricity, computers and connectivity? Only half the world's population have internet with a wide variation within the Commonwealth ranging from nearly 95% access in Brunei to less than 10% in Sierra Leone.

While the status of mobile subscriptions is more encouraging with over 100 % in most countries, access is not universal. The WEF report (Apr 2020) states that the digital divide impacts women more than men. What technologies do we use to ensure that we reach the last person in the queue?

It is not simply a case of the availability of technology. The TVET teachers and trainers simply did not have the capacity to use the technology as a teaching-learning tool. Lack of appropriate training content for online delivery added to the challenge. In several countries, regulatory bodies have been reluctant to accept credentials gained through online training. And the pervasive challenge of exacerbating social inequalities.

Let me share how COL has responded to support Member States to address the challenges of skilling and reskilling the work force in the changed reality. Even before the crisis COL has been promoting the use of blended approaches in TVET to achieve quality and scale--some of the strategies used can work well during this crisis.

COL has been leveraging partnerships, using appropriate technologies to reach the unreached, train teachers and instructors to adopt new methods and tools and provide free curated content that could be used readily.

COL initiated an International Partnership for Distance and Online Learning during COVID 19 to share resources and expertise This has attracted 60 partners globally, including the World Bank.

One partner is Coursera which under their Work Force Recovery programme has made 10,000 free licenses available to COL. COL has offered this to Ministries of Education in all 54 Member States and to partners in the consortium. Countries have welcomed the opportunity to access the free courses for skilling and reskilling their work force. St Lucia alone accounts for over 700 participants. COL's Help Desk with volunteers from around the Commonwealth are offering academic and administrative support to the registrants. COL has also launched a special mentorship initiative CommonwealthWiseWomen.org which links eminent women to mentees in remote regions to motivate and inspire them to take charge of their future in the post-COVID reconstruction phase. These girls too have been offered the opportunity to skill and re-skill themselves under the Coursera programme.

In another partnership with Udemy, COL is helping develop employability skills by providing free and unlimited access to online courses since January. Over 31000 unemployed youth

responded to the call for applications in Ghana. Bravin Mugangasia from Kenya has got a job as a data analyst and can now support his brother's education. Martine Benemariya has been able to turn her failed business around after completing her online course in Rwanda. In Bangladesh, Layla Nur Kaly has been promoted as a manager after completing her online courses. Short targeted courses can show results within smaller timeframes.

Several people in the automobile industry have lost their jobs. COL is partnering with the government of India and LabourNet to reskill people to become sanitization and hygiene entrepreneurs through the use of mobile phones within six weeks. This would result in livelihoods for about 300,000 people. As we can see, partnerships are a valuable strategy for achieving scale.

Another strategy has been to use technologies that can reach the bottom billion. COL's MobiMOOC is a platform that works in low bandwidth situations and has an interface with basic mobile phones. This has been deployed for training farmers during the lockdown.

A MobiMOOC on corporate literacy offered jointly with NABARD (National Bank for Agric and Rural Development), India offers certificates with unique identification numbers that can be verified online.

COL developed Aptus a low-cost offline virtual classroom that provides learners in remote locations with access to digital resources including simulations for training. It is a server that works with a solar charger and a wireless router and costs approximately $ 150.

Quality audio and video content is being developed in partnership with KTTC (Kenya Tech Trainers College) to train master craftsmen in Kenya. These will be loaded on Aptus for reaching remote regions.

Barefoot women engineers are being trained using blended approaches during lockdown.

Women in a remote region in Bangladesh continue to learn in a boat school while observing social distance. As we can see a range of technologies that are available, affordable and accessible are being used to reach the unreached.

As teachers and trainers make the difficult transition from classroom teaching to online provision, they need capacity building. COL has offered two MOOCs on technology enabled and blended learning with Athabasca University with two more scheduled for later this month.

The Ministry of Higher Education in Zambia requested COL, to train over 800 mentors, facilitators and TVET teachers online. One champion within each institution will be responsible for training other TVET teachers.

COL has also developed several Guidelines and instruments that provide practical advice to teachers/instructors for adopting distance and online approaches.

COL has been supporting the use of Open Educational Resources or OER, which is free content available under an open licence. What are the benefits? A study in Antigua & Barbuda showed

that not only did the use of OER save costs for the students but also improved learning outcomes. Today, there are hundreds of OER repositories for academic content but not enough available for skills development. COL has curated content in skills development, available on our website.

COL has also worked with farmers who have developed free content in the local languages and shared these as OER on websites developed by them.

Thirty courses in advanced ICT skills were downloaded 115,000 times during the crisis, indicating the real need for such materials.

Looking at these interventions, what do we propose as the way towards resilient systems prepared for future disasters?

Going forward we need to focus on the three Cs.—connectivity, content and capacity—that would help us to integrate blended approaches into the TVET system. Blended learning refers to a combination of distance and face to face learning and institutions can decide on the percentage of each component depending on the requirements of competencies being developed.

Countries need to invest in ICTs, which includes access to devices, connectivity and zero rating of educational platforms. New Zealand ordered devices for distribution and ministries in South Africa and Jamaica have provided free access to platforms by partnering with telecom companies. Any investment in ICT infrastructure must make provision for reaching the last mile so that existing inequalities are not exacerbated.

As the EC 2020 report indicates, online courses and learning modules for tech voc edn and trg have not been developed to the extent of other academic content. During the lockdown, Shanghai has used simulation, 'demo videos, practical operations live and after-class practice' (Online and Open Edn in Shanghai: emergency response and innovative practice during the COVID-19 Pandemic' UNESCO IITE, 2020). Similarly in the US, virtual reality is being introduced for training nurses. We need to find technology solutions for practicals that can work in low bandwidth situations and are available as OER.

There can be no resilience without the capacity of policy makers and practitioners at various levels. Governments can develop enabling policies and regulatory frameworks to promote blended learning to make the skills development sector more flexible and resilient to deal with future challenges. For institutions, the top priority would be to build the capacity of its staff and of its students to become self-directed lifelong learners.

COL has been working in this field for over 30 years and can confirm that—distance and technology enabled learning can help increase access, improve quality, reduce costs and support inclusion all with a lower carbon footprint. When a typhoid epidemic broke out in 1910, Australia used distance learning to train health inspectors, while they continued to work. With all the technologies we have today, the time is ripe to adopt distance and blended learning as mainstream solution to building resilient skills development systems.