

Bridging the Higher Education Gap: The 3-R Challenge



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Distinguished Colleagues,

It is a pleasure to be here at the University of Mauritius and I am very grateful to ACU and Dr John Wood, Dr John Kirkland and Dorothy Garland for giving me the opportunity to speak to such a distinguished audience.

If we wish to bridge the HE gaps, we first need to look at what these are. A recent report from the World Bank has identified several issues in the different regions of the world and I summarise five of these as

1. Access and equity
2. Financing and cost-efficiencies
3. Governance
4. Quality
5. Recognition of qualifications & mobility. How can these be addressed?

Globally, age participation rates have grown from 19% in 2000 to 26% in 2007. In 2007, there were 150 million tertiary students globally, a 53% increase over 2000. In low income countries, there has been an increase from 5% in 2000 to 7% in 2007. In the last 4 years APRs in India have increased by 65%.

In spite of this huge expansion in Higher Education, the APRs in the developing world are far below those in the OECD countries. For example, in South Asia, the APRs remain at about 15% while in much of sub Saharan Africa, the figure falls below 10%.

Meanwhile, the gap between the demand and supply continues. In 2007, of the 80,000 applicants to the University of Dhaka, only 10,000 could be accommodated. The situation was similar for the public universities in Kenya. Last week the Indian Minister announced that India would need an additional 800 universities if it was to absorb demand by 2020.

How can this demand be met? Let us look at the three R's, Reach, Resources, Relevance, that could help us to address the gaps of access, equity and quality.

The first one is reach—how do we reach the unreached which includes the marginalized and those in remote communities. Given the huge unmet demand for higher education, especially in the developing world, governments are looking for alternative approaches. It was not possible to build the required number of brick and mortar institutions. Open and distance education becomes a viable option which allows us, through division of labour, specialization, and economies of scale, to address the issues of access-costs and quality.

Forty years ago, the Open University, UK was launched to open up education to large numbers of people. That was when the term 'open education' became popular and the model captured the imagination of policy makers around the world. The success of the British Open University led to a huge expansion in open universities, particularly in the developing Commonwealth.

Let us look at the growth of open universities in the Commonwealth. In 1988, there were only 10 open universities in the Commonwealth—3 in Canada and only one in Africa, that is UNISA.

Twenty years later, that is in 2008, the number of open universities in the Commonwealth increased to 27. You can see that only one remained in Canada, the other two having merged with campus universities to become dual-mode. The 28th open university was established in the host country Mauritius, only last month.

Asia alone has over 70 open universities and the numbers continue to grow.^[1] India's fourteen open universities and over 150 dual mode institutions cater to about 7 million students.

Why are open universities so popular? One reason is lower costs. The annual cost per student at the Korean National Open University is \$ 186 as compared to nearly \$3000 for a campus student. Similarly the costs for STOU students are \$ 226 compared to \$ 876 in a campus university.

Dual mode provision similarly has lower costs. The University of Nairobi BEd programme costs three times as much as a distance learning programme. Studies show that dual mode provision costs 15% of campus institutions

A recent study by the National Knowledge Commission, India, shows that mega-universities, which achieve economies of scale cost substantially less than campus institutions. Pakistan's AIOU costs 22%; China 40%; India's IGNOU 35% and the OUUK, 50% as compared to campus universities.

What of quality? The Open University of the UK ranked fifth among the 100 universities surveyed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK and was one rank higher than Oxford University.

Open and distance learning has opened up access to millions across the Commonwealth and is an option worth considering if we wish to close the gaps of access, equity and quality.

The second R is resources. With the rise of social media, there has been a global movement towards collaboration in the development and sharing of content. We have seen the emergence of a global commons powered by the collective intelligence of the masses. At a meeting in 2002 at UNESCO, Paris,

the term Open Education Resources or OER was coined to promote the development and use of free materials for education.

More recently, the World OER Congress was held at the UNESCO HQs during June this year and the global community adopted the Paris OER Declaration, which makes 10 recommendations which relate to four areas—the need for advocacy, capacity building, policy and research in OER.

What are OER? OER are educational materials that are free and freely available, suitable for all levels of education: primary secondary and tertiary, are reusable without having to seek the permission of the original author and available in multiple formats including print, though the reuse is easier in digital format.

More recently, many developing countries are investing in OER. Some of these initiatives are Sakshaat, the Indian Government's OER project, the China Open Resources for Education Initiative, Vietnam's Opencourseware and OER Africa.

The reason OER are gaining ground is because course development is resource intensive, and collaborative content development can save both time and money.

You are aware of the Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) Consortium, led by the Open University UK. COL is a partner in this nine-country initiative, under which partner institutions develop the OER themselves based on their institution's needs, and priorities. The TESSA initiative has reached thousands of teachers and the costs of training one teacher using OER is about \$ 10.

So what impact are OER having on universities? Let me first take the example of the OERU, a consortium of 15 universities which includes the University of Southern Queensland, Otago Polytechnic and Athabasca, among others. The proposal is to use OER to open up education to anyone anywhere in the world.

This would mean that each university places a percentage of its courses as OER, provides voluntary tutors and students pay only if they wish to be assessed. The total cost would be only 20-25 % of what they would normally pay

The London School of Business and Finance is offering a Facebook MBA that would only cost \$ 23,000 as compared to \$ 65000 that a student would pay at Queens University, Canada

Materials developed by the prestigious IITs in India have been opened up to improve the quality of engineering colleges in remote regions in India.

What will be the implications for higher education? OER have the potential to open up access, improve quality and reduce costs to all levels of education. It will be possible for learners to construct their own courses based entirely on free and freely available resources. But who will provide the qualifications? Will we see the rise of new Degree Granting Bodies or Open Courseware Accreditation Agencies? How will the quality and credibility be ensured? Institutions are already grappling with these questions as they prepare to offer parallel pathways to making universal access to higher education a distinct possibility.

Finally the issue of the third 'R', relevance

Today the world has changed and knowledge is multiplying at a rapid pace. Research indicates that students could have two to four careers in a lifetime. They will need to continue to learn, unlearn and re-learn many different things during the course of their life. Does our curriculum prepare our students for making multiple career choices in the ever-changing global economy?

We must prepare students for the skills that are required to succeed in the 21st century. There is an increasing emphasis on skills development in many developing countries. As we know, there are three different types of skills: cognitive; non-cognitive and technical. Cognitive skills relate to analytical and critical thinking, which we are trained in, through academic programmes; non-cognitive skills relate to attitudes like honesty, teamwork and leadership; and technical skills are related to a specific field like construction, IT, tourism etc.

Unemployment is a global challenge. About 45% of the world's young people, many of them girls and women, are without work. What are the skills required for employability? A recent study interviewed employers in five cities in South Asia: New Delhi, Mumbai, Bhopal; Lahore in Pakistan and Dhaka in Bangladesh. Two clear themes emerged from the employer interviews in these three countries. The first is the importance of non-cognitive skills such as leadership, communication, honesty/ethics, teamwork and flexibility. The second is the importance of being able to learn and the need for critical thinking and analytical skills (Burnett, p. 9). This is a very important finding—our educational system has always laid a greater emphasis on cognitive skills. We can see that employers in the twenty first century are increasingly stressing the need for non-cognitive skills.

In North America there is an interesting trend as more young women are earning higher salaries compared to young men. Why is this so? The nature of the economy has changed. Earlier it was a manufacturing economy producing goods and because strength mattered, men dominated the work force. Today we have a knowledge economy in which a different set of skills is required for success. According to Hanna Rosin, what is now needed is intelligence, the ability to sit still and focus, to listen carefully, communicate openly and work in teams. Women can do all these things very well and so they are earning higher salaries. (TED Talk). You will note that most of these skills are non-cognitive skills or what we sometimes call 21st century skills.

The challenge before educational institutions today is how to harness the potential of Open and Distance Learning and OERs. OER is a ground-up movement: are we ready to decentralise institutional processes? How can we transform the curriculum to integrate non-cognitive skills into the curriculum? By opening up education in terms of content and delivery and by transforming the curriculum, we can extend our reach, optimize the use of available resources to provide relevant learning opportunities for the 21st century.

Thank you for your kind attention.

[1] C Latchem & Insung Jung: Distance and Blended Learning in Asia, NY London: Routledge, 2009, p.xiii