Open Education in a Digital Era: the COL Experience

Distinguished Colleagues, let me begin by thanking Prof Jako Olivier, UNESCO Chair on Multimodal Learning and OER and members of the organizing committee, for the invitation to the NOMSA conference. My topic today is 'Open Education in a Digital Era: the COL experience'.

As you know, the Commonwealth of Learning is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government to help Member States and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training. Opening up education is fundamental to our mission.

In this presentation, I will look at the impact of covid 19 on higher education and why higher education is even more important than ever before. I will then focus on what we mean by open education and how COL puts this in practice. This will lead to a reflection on how we can build on the momentum generated and take the road ahead to a better post-covid world.

As we know, Covid 19 has caused the biggest disruption of education in human history where over 95% students worldwide were impacted. The closure of campuses affected more than 220 million HE students worldwide.

Most institutions had to pivot to emergency remote teaching. Many did not have adequate technology infrastructure. The mobility of international students plummeted with countries losing large revenues from student fees. Budget cuts were imposed by governments—research reliant on practical work and external collaborations suffered most.

Data from OECD countries indicates that only 60% of teachers had some training in ICTs. And yet teachers rose to the occasion. A survey conducted in Europe found that most teachers live-streamed lectures synchronously. A large number of teachers also used asynchronous approaches by sending pre-recorded videos and audio lectures.

A study in the US and Canada revealed that over 50% of teachers required help with supporting remote students, needed access to digital materials and wanted assistance with technology. The situation was not much different in the developing Commonwealth.

Students too suffered in various ways--and half of them felt that their performance had declined. Many faced challenges relating to technology tools and connectivity and most felt an impact on their psychological well-being.

The pandemic has further 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. But one silver lining was that both students and teachers learnt to be resilient, managed their time better, acquired basic computer skills to learn and collaborated on various social media platforms.

Another silver lining was the global acceptance of distance and online learning. It would have taken years of advocacy to achieve the overnight transition to remote learning. A recent study in the UK found that the majority of HE students rated the quality of online learning as excellent.

The pandemic has highlighted the need to transform our education systems. Is open education the answer?

As we know, open education describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. Lord Crowther of the UK Open University defined openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas. This forms the basis of what we mean by open education. Open education is a philosophic construct that advocates the removal of constraints and barriers to learning.

Many open universities do not insist on entry qualifications, allow learners to accumulate credits at their own pace and convenience and are flexible enough to allow learners to choose the courses they wish to study towards their qualifications.

The Commonwealth has opened up opportunities for higher education with 33 open universities and hundreds of dual-mode institutions which cater to the needs of millions of students annually, UNISA is one of the mega universities in the Commonwealth.

To begin with, open and distance learning was a disruptive innovation. According to Clayton Christensen this happens in business when 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. 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 the mainstream face-to-face higher education by catering to those outside the mainstream.

But the meaning of open education has grown beyond open universities and evolved over the years to include OER, open access research, open source software, open data etc.

COL has made a significant contribution to the open education movement right from the time it was established to 'assist in the acquisition and delivery of teaching materials and facilitating access to them'. COL supported the development of STAMP 2000+, teacher training modules developed by and for teachers in the SADC sub-region. COL was the first intergovernmental organization to adopt an OER policy and played a lead role in the two World OER Congresses with UNESCO. During the pandemic, when quality digital content was the need of the hour, COL catalysed the Open Door partnership which resulted in partners sharing 200 online courses.

Developments in technology will continue to drive changes in the way we teach and learn—but it can both open up or close access.

The pandemic has seen the second coming of video learning where teachers made significant contributions often reaching their students through mobile devices. In partnership with the OER Foundation, COL launched OER4COVID which attracted participants from 89 countries. The survey

conducted found that people did not simply want access to repositories or general capacity building but rather sought urgent help with curated content aligned to the curriculum.

For low bandwidth contexts, COL responded by developing a video-on-demand service in STEM subjects aligned to the curriculum in Fiji, Nauru and Samoa.

Open Educational Resources were in high demand as teachers looked for quality digital content. A study conducted by OER Foundation and COL in May 2020 found that over 75% of the respondents expressed high demand for OER-based online courses.

COL's MOOC4D provides a computer-mobile interface so that farmers in remote locations could access lessons through basic mobile phones.

COL's Aptus or the Classroom Without Walls is a low-cost server with a wireless router and solar charger that can bring quality content to the remotest regions.

COL supports the MooKIT platform which is used to offer massive open online learning in low bandwith situations. It provides a basic mobile phone interface and open source based video conferencing facilities with the option of generating blockchain certificates.

The COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery initiative skilled and reskilled over 150,000 Commonwealth citizens in the last eighteen months. Where learners had connectivity challenges, they used library facilities and smart phones. Help Desks provided the human support.

For grassroots communities during lockdowns, COL used social media for training women entrepreneurs for livelihoods.

COL has recently launched COL Commons for just in time free professional training. As technology becomes more available, there are increased opportunities for opening up education.

A recent Educause Horizon report asked respondents to pick the top technology trends and practices. The results were not surprising with AI topping the list followed by blended course models, learning analytics, and micro credentials. OER and quality online learning were also considered very important. To what extent are we integrating these technologies and approaches to open up education for all?

We have seen examples of how technologies can be used in different contexts. What does the road ahead look like?

We have seen that purely online options do not work for everyone. The future will be a blend of online and in-person, using a range of technologies that are affordable accessible and available. Because of existing digital divide, COL believes that technology to be effectively harnessed, must be placed in an appropriate social, cultural and political context. Appropriate technologies can offer flexible options for how learning is delivered.

As the pandemic forces governments to cut back on resource allocations for education, we will need to look for cost-effective solutions to bring quality learning to all. Mainstreaming OER by building the capacities of teachers and policy makers and preparing learners on how to find and use OER could be another way forward for providing more flexibility options for what people learn.

We have seen a huge rise in self-directed learning during the pandemic, as we can see from the phenomenal increases in MOOC enrolments—how can we build on these foundations to promote lifelong learning for all? Interestingly formal education accounts for about 18.5 % of time up to grade 12 and this keeps decreasing as we transition to post-secondary study. The rest of our waking lives are spent in informal learning environments—how can teacher-led sequential learning be supplemented with unstructured learner-led approaches to support learning throughout life?

Learning approaches, credentialing and recognition strategies will need to change. Formal assessments and proctoring systems suffered major setbacks during the pandemic—how can we learn from the innovative approaches that people adopted to build flexible models that make assessments more authentic? NZQA has developed a micro-credential framework to provide industry, employers, and/or the community to develop programmes and certify achievement for a coherent set of skills and knowledge.

Governments and institutions need to develop policies for leaving no one behind. This would mean developing policies that address the needs of the last person in the queue—women, girls, those in remote regions and persons with disabilities. The policies that target the margins are also effective in serving the centre. Flexible learning must also take into account who learns.

UNESCO's recent report on reimagining our futures together stresses the need for collaboration, the role of teachers and the principles of equity and inclusion. The pedagogy must move from emphasizing individual achievement to accomplishment; the curricula must be interdisciplinary and integrate ecological and intercultural dimension. Teaching must become a collaborative endeavours; we need to reimagine schools as safe spaces and expand educational opportunities everywhere and for everyone. This is a valuable blueprint for opening up education in a digital age.

On that note, let me thank you for your kind attention.