

# Open Education: an emerging ecosystem



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Distinguished Colleagues, it's a pleasure to be virtually present at the ICDE conference, "Upskilling and Upscaling for quality Open, Flexible and Distance Learning." My topic today is "Open Education: an emerging ecosystem."

But first a word about the Commonwealth of Learning. COL works in 54 Member States that cover all regions of the globe.

COL is the only 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.

In this presentation, I will look at the impact of COVID-19 and then focus on the emerging landscape of higher education. This will lead to a discussion on the different dimensions of open education as they have evolved over the years to address emerging needs. Finally, I will look at what concrete actions can be taken to develop an effective ecosystem of open education to build back better.

As we know, COVID-19 has caused the biggest disruption of education in human history. 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.

Over 63 million teachers were impacted by the pandemic. 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.

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.

In a survey conducted at Stanford University, 16% of the undergraduate students reported not having access to the Internet for half the time and 60% of students from low-income homes did not have a private space for study.

The vulnerable are most impacted in crisis situations, and existing inequalities were further exacerbated.

The pandemic has deepened the learning crisis. A study in the Netherlands records a learning loss of about 3%, with higher losses among students from less-educated homes.

The pandemic had an impact along four dimensions. Existing inequalities were further highlighted during the crisis. There was the pedagogical challenge when teachers had to make the sudden transition to online mode and harness technology for teaching and learning and the psychological impact with deep anxieties about an uncertain future.

Amidst all these disruptions, what were the trends that emerged?

There has been a phenomenal increase in MOOC enrolments. Not just through global brands, such as Coursera and FutureLearn, but also universities, which had earlier hesitated to offer online courses, came forward to offer MOOCs especially for professional development. The COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery Initiative skilled and reskilled over 150,000 Commonwealth citizens in the last eighteen months.

The pandemic has also seen the second coming of video learning where teachers made significant contributions often reaching their students through mobile devices. COL's video-on-demand service brought quality content in low-bandwidth contexts in the Pacific.

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. UNISA developed App-based assessments; Griffith University, Australia used oral assessments for the business programme, and India introduced open book exams at scale.

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.

The recent Educause Horizon report sums up six new trends in higher education: the widening of the digital divide; increased use of hybrid learning; demand for new skills; a focus on sustainable development and a decrease in funding. Can open education be the answer?

As an ODL community, we have always understood that open education describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible.

The founding chancellor of the Open University of the UK, Lord Crowther 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.

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.

Years of advocacy would not have resulted in the global acceptance of distance and online learning that we have seen during the pandemic. A recent study in the UK found that the majority of HE students rated the quality of online learning as excellent.

As we have seen, open education is an evolving concept with varying degrees of openness. How do we open up to embrace a wider diversity of needs and constituencies? Let us now consider the three interrelated aspects of openness relating to access, content and technology.

India has 19 open universities that cater to 11% of all enrolments in higher education, with large enrolments of women and girls.

In pre-COVID-19 days, these children in a remote region in Bangladesh studied in boat schools.

As this was no longer possible during the pandemic, the only way to reach them was to bring teachers to the communities and maintain social distance.

Mobile devices have helped COL reach remote farming communities with lifelong learning opportunities.

Another constituency in danger of being further marginalised during this crisis are persons with disabilities. Even in normal circumstances, the participation of PWD in higher education has been low, especially in developing countries.

Preety Daby in Mauritius could not pass her class 9 exam because of the lack of a braille textbook. Now that she has been provided learning resources and assistive devices she is doing well in class. More PWD prefer open and distance learning, as it is more convenient, flexible, affordable and provides a degree of anonymity.

While there are millions of OER available, the response had been lukewarm. However, during the pandemic, we have seen a rise in demand.

The rise of OER signals three shifts for ODL institutions. Traditionally open universities had an industrial model—the open universities of the future will be a more connected model. There were course development teams within open universities responsible for creating content. Now the teams will be dispersed around the globe and will adopt/adapt existing OER. The rise of OER will encourage the student to be a producer rather than the consumer of content.

The third pillar of openness is technology—one manifestation of which is the MOOC platform which allows us to offer online courses to thousands of students around the world for free. India has developed Swayam, a MOOC platform that will open up opportunities for free quality education around the country. By allowing students to earn up to 40% of course credits towards their qualification through MOOCs, India is further opening up education.

The advent of MOOCs has led us from mega to giga universities. Open universities achieved scale and largely operated within national or regional jurisdictions. With the MOOC platform, the world becomes a connected classroom. Students had limited interactions with tutors in study centres. Today, there is a greater emphasis on peer-to-peer interactions and the use of social media. With their expertise in content design and development, ODL institutions can provide the leadership and support to campus institutions as they transition to online mode.

Technology trends and practices are changing rapidly, as the recent Educause-Horizon report indicates. AI topped the list followed by blended course models, learning analytics, micro-credentials, OER and quality online learning. How can we harness technologies to ensure that no one is left behind?

COL's MOOC4D provides a computer-mobile interface so that these horticulture students can access lessons through their basic mobile phones.

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

But as we increase our use of technology, we need to keep the human touch, through regular communications. 24/7 online hubs and call centres can provide learner support and parents can be engaged through helplines as was the case in Jamaica.

Within this context, what does the road ahead look like?

Intergovernmental agencies can provide evidence-based advocacy for open education, share global best practice and promote partnerships and collaboration.

Governments can strengthen ICT infrastructure, mainstream open education through appropriate policies and promote the development and use of OER, especially in indigenous languages. During the pandemic, even in countries which had open and distance learning institutions and open technology platforms for open content, it became clear that there was a need for better coordination at the national level to ensure optimal impact.

The ODL institutions must develop enabling policies for reviewing their distance and blended approaches in light of the pandemic experience while also strengthening their technology infrastructure and quality assurance. The time is ripe to harnessing the potential of OER. More flexible and blended approaches can be implemented to address the needs of different constituencies. Creative ways of assessments and credentialing will be key. And research will provide the evidence of the efficiency and effectiveness of these approaches.

ODL institutions can play a leadership role in building resilient societies and ride the waves of change. For example, we have seen a huge rise in self-directed learning during the pandemic—we can build on these foundations to promote lifelong learning for all and foster an ecosystem that provides learning for livelihoods.

With that, let me thank you for your kind attention.