Innovative Leadership for Open Education

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Distinguished Colleagues, thank you for the invitation to participate in this panel on innovative leadership for Open Education. I will focus on the benefits of open educational resources and open and distance learning.

In this presentation, I will look at some of the ways in which education opened up during the pandemic. This will lead to a reflection on the implications for universities and how innovative leaders can ensure that open education becomes integral to the post-covid project of building back better.

The closure of campuses affected more than 220 million HE students worldwide. Institutions had no option but to open up learning through the use of technology.

Most institutions had to pivot to emergency remote teaching. 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.

The silver lining in these challenging times has been the global acceptance of distance and online learning. It would have taken years of advocacy to achieve this overnight transition. A recent study in the UK found that the majority of HE students rated the quality of online learning as excellent. How can we build on these positive perceptions to open up education for all?

Several developments during this time have advanced the cause of open education, such as the UNESCO Recommendations on OER and Open Science. Increased access to technology, encouraged a greater use of OER and fostered collaborative content development and sharing. Inequalities in the education system came to the fore and highlighted the need for exploring strategies for openness and access.

OER were in high demand as teachers looked for quality digital content. In a North American study conducted during the pandemic, 44% of administrators were positive about faculty use of OER, while a quarter of teachers believed that OER could contribute significantly to teaching and learning. 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 conducted two surveys on OER in the past five years. In terms of benefits perceived, stakeholders had more appreciation and acceptance of OER in 2021. In 2017 when the first survey was conducted, the

use of OER meant saving time and costs, but in 2021 stakeholders saw OER as a means of promoting open and flexible learning, enhancing the quality of learning and reaching disadvantaged communities.

In 2017 when COL conducted a global OER survey, the main barriers were lack of appropriate policy, capacity and access to quality content. In 2021, results from a Commonwealth-wide survey indicates similar results. But this time the main barrier highlighted was lack of internet connectivity.

If we look at the trajectory of OER, we find that the initial enthusiasm was somewhat dimmed by the advent of MOOCs. However, our experience shows that the pandemic has revived interest in OER, leading to a plateau of productivity. Several developing countries are investing in OER repositories and curating OER content aligned to national curricula.

To sum up, decreasing resources for education in 2/3 of the world's developing countries have the potential to encourage more policy makers and practitioners to join the OER movement. The acute awareness of our interconnectedness during the pandemic could promote more collaboration and sharing. OER must be available in different formats including for PWD. A targeted approach to capacity building in OER can be a concrete strategy for building back better.

What are the implications of these developments for university leaders?

The university management must develop enabling policies for mainstreaming OER within the framework of distance and blended learning approaches. Management must also develop policies that specifically ensure that no one is left behind.

Universities need to rethink the curriculum to make it more integrated with sustainable development. More flexible and blended approaches can be implemented to address the needs of different constituencies. Creative ways of assessments and credentialling will be key to a more open ecosystem.

Both teachers and students will need support for making the transition to the new normal. Institutions will need to invest in digital infrastructure and the capacity building of staff and students in digital competencies.

Many institutions still function on centralized systems with limited academic freedom. Teachers as key stakeholders have a limited voice. Governance is poor and will need a complete review to make it more relevant to contemporary needs.

Can open education thrive in closed educational settings?

The pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to build back better—how can innovative leaders transform the educational system?

Innovative leadership brings fresh and creative thinking to leadership tasks. Leadership for innovation means creating an institutional culture where innovative thinking flourishes. And leaders for the future of Open Education need to combine both.

Institutional culture depends on leadership and the extent to which we can motivate and inspire staff to reach higher levels of achievement and accomplishment. Institutional leaders must encourage a spirit of inquiry and a culture of research. In their book The Innovators' DNA, Dyer, et al identify innovation skills that can be learned: questioning, observing, networking and experimenting. Asking simple questions can often lead to profound discoveries. Observing closely is a skill that all innovators share.

Innovators are great networkers— leaders must promote interdisciplinary exchanges so that by connecting different disciplines and sectors, innovative ideas emerge. And finally, innovators are always trying out new experiences and solutions.

I believe that leaders who will shape the future of open education will need to invest in the three Ps: philosophy, people and processes.

Let us take philosophy first. The founding chancellor of the Open University of the UK, Lord Crowther defined openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas. This formed the basis of what we mean by open education and inspired the establishment of open universities around the world.

This founding philosophy continued to inspire future leaders. Sir John Daniel's evolutionary approach to the integration of technology resulted in more online courses and more student enrolments during his tenure as VC. As VC, he also enrolled as a student in his own university to experience the learning process at first hand. He led by personal example and is one of the most powerful advocates for open and distance learning.

If we want to make a difference, we need to be truly open in terms of people, places, methods and ideas. How can we become more effective advocates for Open Education as we need to continually convince policy makers and stakeholders about the efficiency and effectiveness of this mode?

Innovative leaders must not only motivate and inspire staff but also provide incentives, where appropriate.

Let us take the example of Prof Melinda Bandelaria, the chancellor of the University of the Philippines Open University. She successfully spearheaded open education by offering MOOCs and promoting OER by involving the stakeholders in her institution. Openfight, an online training programme for teachers and school officials offered during the pandemic was successful because she was able to carry her staff along. She has led national and international collaborations to promote open education.

Innovative leaders need staff to buy into their vision and translate it into reality--how can we cultivate champions for change?

Leaders must also develop the policies and processes that foster innovation. There must be an environment for healthy discussion and debate and a targeted approach to addressing specific issues.

Let us take the example of the Zhejiang University, China. Within two weeks of lockdown, Prof Zhaohui responded with a sense of urgency to offer 5000 courses online, trained faculty members and forged a partnership with Alibaba to reach the unreached by using a live streaming App.

How can leaders ensure that their institutions keep evolving to remain relevant to the needs of stakeholders?

Opening up education is ultimately about quality, equity and inclusion. Is access enough? Does access diminish inequality? How will leaders ensure the quality of open education? How can we bridge existing divides and offer education to the millions who cannot afford education?

I'm sure we can make a difference through our collective efforts. Thank you.