From Response to Resilience: Future of Open Learning

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Distinguished Colleagues, thank you for the invitation to be part of this important webinar. My topic today is 'From Response to Resilience: Future of Open Learning'.

UNESCO IITE, has responded with urgency to the COVID 19 crisis with several significant initiatives. The impressive report on 'Online and Open Education in Shanghai: Emergency Response and Innovative Practice during COVID 19 Pandemic' in partnership with Shanghai Open University and East China Normal University is an excellent example of collaboration that documents the several innovations in Shanghai that have kept the doors of learning open.

My organization 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.

At 15th May, there were an estimated 574 million students in the Commonwealth impacted by school closures.

The Commonwealth has a population of 2.4 billion with 60% of them under the age of 30.

Youth unemployment in Commonwealth Member States at 17% is higher than the global average.

When the pandemic struck, the education sector was clearly not prepared and had to look for immediate solutions. Online provision was the preferred option. But how many students have access to electricity, computers and connectivity? Only half the world's population have internet access 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. What technologies do we use to ensure that we reach the last person in the queue?

The pandemic has impacted every aspect of our lives. In this presentation I will look at the impact on education from four perspectives—first, social issues and how institutions continued to combat inequalities during the crisis. Second, the pedagogical challenge when teachers had to make the sudden transition to online mode. Third, the challenge of harnessing technology for teaching and learning and finally the psychological impact and the anxieties resulting from the uncertainty about the future.

Let us see how some institutions have responded.

If the child cannot go to school, the school comes to the child. Having left school at 12, when she was married, Rehana Sultan of Bangladesh was able to go back to school at the age of 22 when her three children asked her to help with their homework. Open schools were open during the crisis because they offered distance learning.

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

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

When crisis strikes, it is girls who are the most at risk of dropping out of education. You can see from this photo, how these illiterate women in India learnt corporate finance through their basic mobile phones.

We have initiated Commonwealthwisewomen, a mentorship programme for underprivileged girls which links them with eminent women to develop leadership skills.

Another constituency that is in danger of being further marginalised during this crisis are people with disabilities. Even in normal circumstances, the participation of PWD in higher education has been low, especially in developing countries such as India and South Africa.

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 and plans to go to university.

More PWD prefer distance learning as it is more convenient, flexible, affordable and provides a degree of anonymity.

Let us now turn to how the pedagogical challenge has been dealt with and how institutions have addressed issues of teaching learning and assessment.

Technology is being used to personalize learning. An IBM report cites one example of the Intelligent Tutoring System. These systems use AI techniques to simulate one-to-one human tutoring. They are able to provide timely feedback, all without the presence of a human teacher.

The Open University of Malaysia has developed chatbots to provide personalised tutoring facilities to its learners.

Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality technologies have great potential to improve learner experience. During this crisis VR is being used in the USA to train nurses while simulations have been used for TVET training in Shanghai. Some institutions have established labs for students to experience AR/VR. However, these are so far available in well resourced urban centres—what about learners in remote rural areas?

Learner support is weak in many open universities. We need to invest in 24/7 online hubs and call centres. Learning analytics have helped to provide personalised learning and improvement in learning outcomes in many institutions.

Assessment has been a challenge during this crisis. AI-based assessment constantly provides feedback to learners, teachers and parents about how the students learn, the support they need and the progress they are making towards their learning goals. Micro-credentials are leading to the possibility of offering shorter, just-in-time courses that can be taken at one's own pace or time. The credentials can also be transferred from one institution to another.

Today we have a vast resource of open content or OER that we can adopt or adapt according to our needs. COL has developed a repository of OER in higher education, teacher training and skills development that could be of use. Since the content is OER it can easily be translated into Chinese and adapted to the local context.

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

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.

Now that the world has been forced to use technologies, we will see several innovative uses.

Major MOOC initiatives have been taken in China, and other Asian countries where thousands of courses are available in Asian languages.

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

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.

This was deployed when a cyclone hit Tonga and The Bahamas

The pandemic has had a huge psychological impact—something we have not given much attention to in the past.

When an earthquake hit New Zealand in 2011, the main focus was on providing emotional support to children and their communities. Now again when parents are suffering from job losses and students are dealing with school closures and isolation, the need for empathy and well-being has been highlighted.

With more persons using technology, there are the challenges of cyber security, data privacy and the safety of networked devices.

Institutions have realized the value of frequent communications. For example the NIOS in India has established call centres to support learners. Similarly Jamaica has provided free SIM cards to parents so they can access the help lines set up for them.

From the experience of this pandemic, one thing has become clear—that we need to be better prepared for future disasters. How can we build resilient systems?

As distance learning institutions, open universities have been providing access to quality education at low costs and supporting inclusion all with a lower carbon footprint.

From this crisis, it is clear that we need to review our policies and practices. The focus should be on developing the skills and competencies of our learners. They will demand greater flexibility to move back and forth from academia to employment. Micro-credentials will be as important as degrees. The staff and students will have to become lifelong learners to deal with the uncertain future.

In order to become resilient, open learning institutions must invest in innovations. In their book The Innovators' DNA, Dyer et al identify innovation skills that can be learned: questioning, observing, networking and experimenting. Open universities need to create a culture where these skills can be acquired and reinforced for both staff and students.

Second, open universities must take the lead in addressing the issue of employability for youth. As countries suffer from an economic downturn, we will need to prepare our youth for livelihoods—employment and entrepreneurship. This will require a curriculum that addresses the needs of industry and society.

Third, focus on lifelong learning. From the very beginning, open learning institutions have catered to the needs of lifelong learners. Lifelong learning includes the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning. As countries need to skill and reskill their workforce, Open Learning can be a cost-effective option for training and re-training our learners.

Whatever approach we adopt, let us ensure that our graduates have the three literacies that will prepare them for the future. First, the human literacy, prepares students to perform jobs that only human beings can do. Human literacy will help them to make ethical choices, equip them for social engagement through effective communication. Second, data literacy is essential in a world driven by data. Learners must be able to find meaning in the flood of information around us. Third, technological literacy is essential if we are to understand machines and their uses. Learners must be able to deploy software and hardware in order to maximize their powers to achieve and create. If we can equip our learners with these three literacies, we will be preparing them for the uncertain world ahead.

With that let me thank you for your attention.

Let me also invite you to join the International Partnership for Distance and Online Learning during COVID 19 to share resources and expertise. IITE is a member and you will agree collaboration and partnership is the way forward.