Achieving Lifelong Learning in the Digital Age: the role of open universities

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Distinguished Colleagues, thank you for the invitation to the online Lifelong Education Forum. I had the opportunity to visit Zhejiang Open University in person two years ago when I was most impressed with the technology innovations and the leadership that the institution was providing in skills development. My topic today is 'Achieving Lifelong Learning in the digital age: the role of open universities'.

But first a word about the Commonwealth of Learning. COL is an intergovernmental organisation that works in 54 countries that span all regions of the globe.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to education and training.

In this presentation, I will first focus briefly on what we understand by lifelong learning and why it matters. This will be followed by examples of how three Commonwealth countries are implementing lifelong learning. Technology has a major role in promoting lifelong learning for all--I will highlight this with some examples from COL's work. In conclusion, I will look at the role of open universities in contributing to the development of learning societies.

First, what do we mean by lifelong learning and why is it important?

The Edgar Faure Report (1972) made the initial formal statement on lifelong education, which highlighted a holistic approach for the complete development of the individual. In the 1970's the focus was on 'education,' but in the 1996 Delors Report, we can see a transition from 'education' to 'learning'. This is an important distinction.

Formal education only accounts for a small fraction of the time we spend in learning. In 16 waking hours during grades 1 to 12, we spend 18.5 % time in formal learning environments—and this keeps decreasing as we transition to tertiary education. The rest of our waking lives are spent in informal learning environments.

As we know, lifelong learning is a continuum from cradle to grave. It can take place in formal, non-formal or informal contexts. The motivation could be employment-related, personal, or for social or cultural reasons. What is the priority today?

The global community agreed to work together to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. These relate to poverty, gender equality, health and climate change—and can only be achieved through lifelong learning.

In fact, SDG4 aspires to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030.

But how will we measure lifelong learning? Most of the targets of SDG 4 focus on the formal education sector--what are the mechanisms for integrating formal, non-formal and informal learning? If we are to achieve SDG4 by 2030, we need to move beyond the 'business as usual' approach and the 'brick and mortar' mindset which assumes that learning is only possible within the walls of a classroom. We will need alternative and innovative approaches to address the challenge.

As Stiglitz and Greenwald remind us that what separates the developed from the less developed countries is not just a gap in resources or output but a gap in knowledge. Lifelong learning must become a strategy for national development.

A recent McKinsey report found that by 2030 over 220 million Chinese workers may need to transition to new occupations. In addition, the demand for physical and cognitive skills could decline with a greater need for social, emotional and technological skills. Over 330 million migrant workers may need help as they move from rural to urban areas. All these constituencies will need skilling and reskilling at different stages in their lives.

Let us look at how three Commonwealth countries—Australia, Singapore and South Africa--have promoted lifelong learning.

Adult Learning Australia is the key organisation promoting lifelong learning for a dynamic economy. It addresses issues related to: literacy, non-formal learning, young people, ageing population, and rural Australia. But there is no comprehensive national policy on lifelong learning which would serve to co-ordinate the formal, non-formal and informal sectors.

However, Australia has an overarching national Qualifications Framework that includes Recognition of Prior Learning so that credit can be given for non-formal and informal learning. This framework has served as a model for the development of qualifications frameworks internationally and is an important element in promoting lifelong learning.

Singapore aims to build a competitive economy by investing in citizens to develop their fullest potential through continuous skilling and reskilling. The government provides the funds for several programmes that support career guidance, and job placements.

The government has invested significantly in lifelong learning. All Singaporeans over 25 receive an opening credit of S$500 for 'skills development and lifelong learning'. In addition, a mid-career enhancement subsidy covers those over 40, so that older members of the workforce can become lifelong learners. In this case, incentives are key.

South Africa has a visionary national policy on lifelong learning which aims to redress post-apartheid social inequities. The South African National Qualifications Framework enables the recognition of learning and learner mobility from early childhood to higher education. There are strong linkages between skills training and the labour market, and the government has established a national career advice portal.

South Africa believes in open and distance learning as a viable strategy for achieving lifelong learning. As far back as 1995, the African National Congress stated that 'to meet the challenge of lifelong learning successfully, we need to recognise the delivery of education and training within an open learning framework.'

As we have seen, these countries have adopted various strategies: National Qualifications Frameworks, distance learning, financial incentives. We have also noted that lifelong learning is understood differently in different contexts. In spite of the attempts to broaden the frame of reference, we still find the focus on the formal education sector.

What role can technology play in implementing lifelong learning? What does the COL experience show?

The recent Educause Horizon report highlights the top technology trends and practices. AI topped the list, followed by blended course models, learning analytics, and micro credentials. OER and quality online learning were also considered very important. How can we ensure that we use appropriate and affordable technologies to leave no one behind?

As we are aware, Covid-19 disrupted education across the world. But we have also seen a huge rise in self-directed learning during the pandemic. MOOCs were in great demand, especially professional courses. How can open universities build on this momentum to promote lifelong learning?

The COL-Coursera workforce recovery project has skilled and reskilled over 150,000 Commonwealth youth for livelihoods. Where connectivity was not available, learners used library facilities to access the online courses or used mobile phones.

MOOCs continue to provide opportunities for lifelong learning. But to ensure no one is left behind, COL has tailored blended MOOCs to suit the needs of developing countries. These gardeners in remote locations have been reached by audio-MOOCs through their basic mobile phones.

In India, COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers initiative empowered illiterate women to become lifelong learners where they learnt corporate finance through their basic mobile phones. Learning led to empowerment which in turn resulted in economic benefits.

COL also developed Aptus, a low-cost server with a wireless router and solar charger to reach the unreached with lifelong learning opportunities.

The COL experience shows that ICTs by itself will not help us achieve lifelong learning but must be placed in an appropriate social, political and economic context. The bottom billion can be reached by providing simple technology solutions such as basic mobile phone interface, social media integration and open content designed for delivery in low bandwidth situations. Technology solutions designed for the last person in the queue have the potential to benefit even privileged constituencies.

In conclusion, let us reflect on how open universities can contribute to lifelong learning for all.

Open universities have typically provided learning opportunities for all. The mission statement of the Open University of Malaysia commits to widening access to quality education—but it goes beyond higher education to promote lifelong learning.

Sukhothai Thamathirat Open University aims to use distance education to open up opportunities for lifelong learning for all.

The Open University of Sri Lanka also speaks of access, quality and affordability for lifelong learning.

Zhejiang Open University is using technology and community centres to provide lifelong learning opportunities for community education, senior education and club activities.

While open universities have programmes for continuing education for all age groups using a range of technologies, the primary approaches adopted have been pedagogy and andragogy. What is needed is heutagogy, or self-directed and self-determined learning, where learning can take place according to the needs and choice of each learner.

First, there is a need to shift the emphasis from formal education alone to a blend of formal, non-formal and informal learning. The teacher-led sequential learning in formal education needs to be supplemented with unstructured learner-led approaches to support the learning needs of individuals at different stages of their lives. Open and distance learning can be a very powerful means of not just expanding access to formal education but also supporting non-formal and informal learning.

Second, the operationalisation of lifelong learning involves moving beyond pedagogy to the integration of three approaches: pedagogy, andragogy and heutagogy. In pedagogy, the learner depends on the teacher for what and how to learn. Under andragogy, the adult learners are more independent, learn when they need and use their own experiences. But what is learned is still determined by the teacher. The heutagogic approach refers to the independent learner, who determines what and how to learn and the learning is not planned and can take place anywhere.

Can heutagogy be integrated into formal learning programmes? According to Blaschke (2012:63), educators in the nursing, engineering and education professions have found heutagogy to be a credible response to the critical issues learners are faced with. The University of Western Sydney has implemented the heutagogical approach in its teacher education programme resulting in improved teacher outcomes and more capable teachers (Blaschke, 2012). Another study shows that the heutagogical approach in three higher education institutions in the UK led to more reflective learning.

Third, the social justice agenda has been central to the mission of open universities who have tried to reach the most vulnerable and marginalised. More than six of 10 workers operate in the informal economy and this includes migrant workers. One third of all workers worldwide are engaged in the agriculture sector. How can open universities reach these constituencies at scale?

Fourth, the present approaches to lifelong learning have focused more on acquiring skills and competencies for livelihoods, with the main emphasis still being on formal learning. We need to shift the focus to transformative learning. This would mean not just adapting to changing circumstances but also acquiring the ability to change circumstances.

The SDGs aim to transform the world for the people, planet, prosperity and peace. If such goals are to be achieved lifelong learning should be perceived beyond acquiring skills and competencies to focus on empowerment. Such an approach would also lead to environmental conservation and peace.

The recent McKinsey report highlights the four levers of transformation—digital technologies, collaborative ecosystem, enhanced vocational training and a shift in mindset. The shift in mindset will be critical.

Governments can play an enabling role by developing inclusive lifelong learning policies. Existing accreditation mechanisms which focus on formal education need to be revisited to include non- formal and informal learning. Policies on ICT infrastructure and governance will determine how technology can close rather than widen divides. Incentives for lifelong learning will be important to ensure this transition.

With the recent global acceptance of distance and online learning, open universities will have a key role in providing seamless pathways between learning that takes place in different contexts and times.

Learning approaches, credentialing and recognition strategies will need to change. ODL and technology-enabled learning will be major mechanisms in dealing with the magnitude of the challenge, particularly providing cost-effective ways to lifelong learning opportunities for all. As the world looks for ways to build back better, open universities can show the way.

With that let me thank you for your attention.