Reimagining the open university in the C21

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Its an honour to speak to such a distinguished audience of eminent leaders from Africa and Asia. Thank you for coming. The title of my presentation 'Reimagining the open university in the C21', which I have prepared with my colleague Dr Tony Mays, reflects the theme of our discussions over the next two days

As you know, COL is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government with headquarters in Metro Vancouver, Canada and a regional office here in Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, our host for this event. We are very grateful to our director Dr Shahid Rasool and his team for organising this in collaboration with IGNOU and MHRD.

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

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

This can increasingly be done by harnessing the potential of existing and new technologies.

In my presentation, I will first review the context of higher education today and then look at the evolution of open and distance learning. I will then highlight some of the innovations driven by technology and look at the implications they have for open universities. In conclusion, I will look at key areas that we need to address and the key elements of our operations that we need to revisit if we are to reimagine a model of an OU relevant to the needs of the C21.

First, the context.

In the decade between 2005 to 2015 we have seen a steady rise in Gross Enrolment Ratios in tertiary education from 25% to a global average of over 35 %. And the demand continues to grow.

Higher levels of education usually translate into better employment opportunities and higher earnings. "Among tertiary-educated adults, the relative earning advantages increase with the level of tertiary education. On average across OECD countries, those with a master's, doctoral or equivalent degree earn twice as much as those with lower qualifications" (OECD, 2017).

Similarly, if we look at data relating to tertiary graduates in Canada, we find that the earnings of a PhD holder are almost double those of a college graduate.

Convinced that higher education leads to higher earnings and social mobility, policy makers have invested in higher education. Both developed and developing countries such as South Korea, Chile and the UK have very high GER and the number of people with degrees grows worldwide. Despite that, there is a high rate of unemployment.

Andreas Schleicher concludes 'countries have skills shortages, not degree shortages'. In many countries more than 50% of employers report having difficulty filling jobs with people with the right skills.

Multiple surveys in 2016 indicated that 'soft skills' such as critical thinking, communication, organisation and leadership were what employers were looking for. We have been talking about these 21st century skills since the turn of the century, but to what extent have we integrated these into our curricula? Have we harnessed the potential of new technologies to adapt both WHAT and HOW we teach?

Our institutions exist to serve the learner. Who is this learner? The turn of the century gave rise to the digital natives who are technology-savvy learners, usually young school-leavers entering the higher education system.

Today, the learner in higher education is one who has technological means to learn. Are we developing learners who are employable, entrepreneurial and responsible global citizens? Are we motivating learners to be self-regulated with analytical and collaborative abilities to perform well?

Let us now briefly touch on the evolution of ODL in response to the changing context.

We speak of the fourth industrial revolution today—what has been the impact of these revolutions on ODL?

In the first industrial revolution when the steam engine was invented, higher education made a transition from being elite to one which anyone could aspire to. The second industrial revolution was marked by the assembly line and mass production, when it became possible to produce self-instructional booklets and offer correspondence courses. The rise of the computer and internet in the third revolution led to the rise of open and distance learning and open universities and today in the fourth revolution, marked by AI and Robotics, we have OER and MOOCs.

Using Christensen's disruptive innovation model in higher education, we find open and distance learning (ODL) as the real innovation at the bottom of the pyramid that continues to challenge the mainstream face-to-face higher education. The campus institutions have become mainstream over 900 years of existence and the state, students and parents continue to sustain the demand for them. However, ODL began to cater to those who were left outside mainstream higher education.

ODL as an innovation is now manifesting itself as online and blended learning. This is when the boundaries begin to blur between campus and ODL institutions. According to the Distance Education Enrolment Report 2017, about 30% of students in higher education in the USA are taking at least one distance education course. MOOC, another form of distance education, has been embraced by the top-tier universities. This shows that ODL, the initial disruptor is being mainstreamed.

When COL first started operations in 1988, there were ten open universities in the Commonwealth. Three in Canada alone with just one in Africa, UNISA, the oldest open university in the world since it started its distance learning operations in 1946.

Today there are 31 open universities in the Commonwealth. The trend is clear—in developed countries such as Canada, two dedicated open universities merged with campus institutions so only one dedicated distance learning institution, Athabasca, remains. The growth has been phenomenal in developing countries, however. Recently COL conducted a survey of 27 open universities in the Commonwealth and found that collectively, these institutions catered to 4.4 million learners (COL, 2017). In ten of these open universities, the number of female enrolments exceeded those of males.

As Otto Peters said, the C20 universities are based on an industrial model which works through a division of labour, mass production and distribution and efficient planning and organisation. But things change …

Thomas Kuhn, first used the notion of paradigm as a disciplinary matrix that is shared by a scientific community. When the disciplinary matrix undergoes a revision, a paradigm shift occurs. Since then, the concept of paradigm shift has become more flexible and is applied to many a field where contemporary knowledge or practice finds a new way of doing business. While the shift that we are referring to is 'soft' in comparison to the revolution in science, we can see a paradigm shift in the way our institutions of higher education have evolved in the past. This is primarily due to the exponential growth of knowledge driven largely by developments in technology.

The shift from external degrees to distance education happened in a century. However, the time spans for paradigms to shift are getting radically reduced. OER took root within a decade from 2002 to 2012, while MOOCs have become part of our lexicon in just five years. As we note, paradigms are shifting in shorter timespans than ever before. Are we ready to make the transitions?

Ronald Barnett proposes a four quadrant model of universities that we can extend to analyse the nature of being a university in the 21st century. In quadrant (a) we have the ivory tower universities like Oxford and Cambridge; in quadrant (b) there are several disciplinary universities like universities of technology, agriculture universities, and medical universities; in quadrant (c) we can place private and corporate universities that are more enterprising, while in quadrant (d) we can put open and virtual universities. The boundaries of these quadrants are permeable, and each of the categories can have characteristics of the other. What is important to note is the notion of the 'developmental university', with the objective to help improve the world – by putting the knowledge to work for development. This is something that the open universities continuously aspire to, and should focus on in their programme offerings.

In this scenario, learners will need to skill and reskill themselves. Learners will need to move back and forth from academia to employment. This will give rise to the network of multi-versities. Micro-qualifications will be as important as degrees. The faculty will also have to become lifelong learners to keep pace with these changes. The focus will be on acquiring knowledge and skills in new modes of delivery and pedagogy.

A Delphi survey was conducted recently to get the views of experts on what kind of higher education institution will be needed in the future. The results of the survey suggested there were four key pillars : a future skills focus, a commitment to lifelong learning, multi-institutional pathways and personalisation of academic learning.

Let us look at some innovations and their implications for the future of ODL.

MOOCs with their flipped classroom approaches and global reach are disrupting the classroom lecture. Blockchain has the potential to challenge the authority of accreditation bodies. Micro-credentials call into question the relevance of full degrees and OER are disrupting business models built on intellectual property rights.

MOOC platforms allows us to offer free online courses to thousands of students around the world. MOOCs are an important solution to three key challenges in the current education system: one - that it is rigid, two - that it is overly expensive and three - that it takes a lot of time to complete. Top universities have taken the lead in offering MOOCs to a world deprived of quality education at a low cost. This is an evolving definition as there are hybrid/blended models of MOOCs such as the COL MOOC4D. The new business model emerging will not necessarily guarantee free MOOCs.

MOOCs are opening up education as never before. Universities have so far largely operated within national or regional jurisdictions. With the MOOC platform, the world becomes a connected classroom. Students had limited interactions in the classroom or on campus. Today, there is a greater emphasis on peer to peer interactions and the use of social media. Universities will increasingly make use of emerging technologies to support their learners, the digital natives.

Blockchain, a major development in the area of financial technology, is, in effect, an open source online register that is maintained cooperatively. A learner can have a distinct, persistent ID in this space. An agency that imparts learning could track progress and add scores and sign off, making the entire set of records a block. Another agency where the same learner takes up learning can create a similar block. It is important to note that the records cannot be modified at all. Many such blocks can be "chained" together. A prospective employer could verify directly the veracity of claims about learning achievements.

This diagram, created at the Knowledge Media Institute of the Open University UK, shows how different stakeholders, including the students, participate in maintaining the Blockchain. The student acquires the profile, institutions add credit and status information, accreditors determine qualifications, while the employer can verify the credentials. Blockchain certificates have been initiated at MIT which is pioneering blockchains in learning.

Blockchain will challenge paper credentials and paper certificates that are the norm today. The verification process will be possible online and this would deal a blow to digital diploma mills. Instead of the manual authentication of portfolios, institutions will be able to carry out this process online.

Because of the near ubiquity of technologies, it is now possible to offer micro-credentials. As we seek to skill and reskill our learners for the changing nature of jobs, micro-credentials provide options for low-cost flexible learning. MIT has already introduced the MicroMasters programme which can prepare the learner for employment or further qualifications.

Micro-credentials are leading to unbundling of long courses and programmes into shorter, just-in-time courses that allow lifelong learners to continue their learning journey at their own convenience. Micro-credentials will make us re-think our semester courses to develop shorter modules, which can be taken at one's own pace or time. The credentials can also be transferred from one institution to another.

Open Educational Resources or OER are a fairly new dimension of openness. Now there are millions of pages of open content available on the web. How can we benefit from world class quality content?

The rise of OER signals three shifts for institutions. Traditionally learners have had to bear the high costs of textbooks—the future could mean free content for all. There are course development teams within the university 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 simply the consumer of content.

Can technology help us make our learners more employable? A study of a Coursera MOOC platform published in Harvard Business Review indicates that MOOCs can provide many tangible and intangible

benefits to the learners. For example, 26% found a new job, 9% started their own business, and 62% improved their skills in current job roles.

What then would be the new models of open universities in the C21?

It might be helpful to recall the words of the founding chancellor of the Open University of the UK, Lord Crowther, who defined openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas. Open education is a philosophic construct that advocates the removal of constraints and barriers to learning— Open education refers to policies and practices that allow entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender, or time constraints, thereby reaching newer constituencies.

More recently, the global community adopted the 17 SDGs of which SDG 4 is dedicated to education and aspires to ensure 'inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all' The higher education community cannot remain aloof from national and global goals.

OUs already have a history of providing lifelong learning. Let us build on this experience to create an ecosystem that promotes lifelong learning for all. Lifelong learning includes the whole spectrum of formal non-formal and informal learning. Simply reforming current education systems will not be enough. Countries will need to continually skill and reskill their workforce, both young and old, throughout their lives.

Some of our mission statements already express a commitment to lifelong learning, as you can see in the case of the Open University of Malaysia, Sukkhothai Thamathirat Open University and the Open University of Sri Lanka.

Changing 4 jobs by 32 is the new normal for the millennials. Thus, it would be imperative to prepare them to be employable. This will require a balance between theory and practice; a focus on hard as well as soft skills, a curriculum that addresses the needs of industry. The orientation will change to providing certification based on proven competence rather than the number of hours attended.

To create a higher education system that is responsive to the market needs and future requirements, it is necessary to look at the different stages of the employability pathway and to re-imagine our policies and practices.

While the technology disruption could change the educational landscape for the better, without equitable opportunity for all, these developments may create further divides. Therefore, it would be important to have appropriate policies in place to provide affordable and low-cost options to people with disabilities and everyone else who needs higher education.

With so much disruption and change, where are the opportunities for open universities? The C 21 open universities will not be industrial as in the past but will be networked institutions with increased emphasis on collaboration and sharing. We will need to revisit our institutional cultures and business models.

Institutional culture will depend on leadership and to the extent that we can motivate and inspire staff to walk the extra mile. New technologies can provide data for informed decision-making.

As practices change, so will our notions of quality. COL works constantly to develop guidelines for good practice. The focus of quality is now on learning outcomes and the employability of our graduates.

Recent research supports the call for blended approaches to teaching and learning. Learners want engagement and instant feedback. We also need to guide learners to become self-directed and autonomous so that they are well prepared for learning throughout life.

Since we are no longer testing only knowledge but also skills and competencies, we need new ways of assessing performance. Openness and flexibility requires that we recognise prior learning and make it possible for learners to transfer their credits anytime anywhere.

All of us need to invest more in learner support and technology can help us to an extent. 24/7 online hubs and call centres can prove to be very helpful if they are run effectively. Learning analytics have helped to provide personalised learning and improvement in learning outcomes.

As Julius Nyerere said, 'Decades ago, as President of my country, I told Tanzanians that the choice before them was to change or be changed. I was wrong. There was no choice. They had to change and even so, they would still be changed".

Will we be changed regardless? Or can we actively influence and shape the course of change?

Thank you for your attention.