

Perspectives and Innovation in ODL



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Video Presentation

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Professor Peter Scott...

I'm delighted to be at the Inaugural session of the International Conference on Perspectives and Innovation in Open and Distance Education. I regret that my schedule does not allow me to be present in person, but I wish you all the best for your conference.

There are three parts to this presentation:

I will start by recapping who we are and say a little about what we do, that will interest you today.

Then I will hand over to my colleague, Dr Tony Mays, who will pick up some ideas about how we might work more together, in future.

Then I will add a few closing remarks.

Let us begin by recapping who we are.

The Commonwealth of Learning is an intergovernmental organization. That is to say that we are an instrument of governments, specifically the 56 governments that make up the Commonwealth. Since the Commonwealth covers around 2.5 billion people (that's 1/3 of the population of the world, with half of that in India!), it has a loud voice... and of course, India's voice is significant in that community.

But community nature of the Commonwealth means that even the smallest country can be heard.

These Commonwealth voices come together to have a shared view of –wealth in common, shared –priorities, in common and shared, common –challenges.

I imagine that we can all see (and agree on) many challenges and priorities in our world, from changes in the climate, through food security to in-equable access to resources. But we also, at least here, will agree that education is both a challenge itself and a critical factor in successfully addressing all the other challenges.

Indeed, for over 36 years, COL has had a mission to deliver a common change in education, using one critical tool: open.

We believe that where a practice, policy, or technology can be 'open', it can be an instrument to drive equity and access. Those who strive for the open agenda believe that education is a common good and at its best when co-created (in partnership), shared (in a community), and available to all (as a matter of principle). The principle of 'open' leads to our actions...

So, what DOES the Commonwealth of Learning DO?

COL's focus is on what the UN have described as 'Sustainable Development Goal 4' to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".

For the UN, looking at the whole world, the goal of "quality education for all" is a very complex picture. But for COL, we believe that there is, within this large programme, an agile way to respond to our changing world. For us, changes in technology can allow us to deliver real change against a small set of relatively simple principles.

For any innovation to work, it must allow us to change our approach to a chronic problem. It must allow us to build on something that is now possible today, that we could not do yesterday. For us, there's a few candidates for that agile leap forward... all of them coming out of an open approach to making the world yet more open.

But we are mindful of the risks here, even as we embrace innovation, we must take care that we do not widen the already significant divides – digital and otherwise. In fact, we will always need to use a range of older and newer technologies together for inclusive contexts even within the same country ... it's always about appropriate use of appropriate technology for context.

To realise this agility, we work in three main streams:

The first is with government on Building National Resilience. Government creates and manages instruments of policy and regulation. We believe that these can be tuned to promote good (open) behaviour and require "the assurance of quality" in national institutions.

Secondly, we focus on strengthening those institutions themselves. For them, we aim to leverage innovative technologies to drive co-creation and sharing. Before Covid that meant largely working with the 'already open' institutions (universities and schools); but since online has become a 'new normal of blended learning', this agenda has increased in the mainstream, so more and more we now "normalize" the change process in learning and support quality.

And finally, our principle is that empowered learners are better learners. So, to improve lives and livelihoods, we must reach out to connect and upskill the most disadvantaged in the most scalable way.

So, how can we work together with you on this agenda? Let me hand over to my colleague, Tony Mays (Director Education at COL), to identify some of the possibilities. Tony?

Dr Tony Mays...

Thank you, Prof Scott.

COL's approach is always to start with research which indicates a need and the nature of that need. The graph from UNESCO illustrates that our attempts to reduce the number of OOSC have largely plateaued – and in fact in the previous year the number increased by 6m to 250m. Other studies tell us that there are large and growing numbers of NEETs in most countries.

Having understood the need, we can design an appropriate intervention.

Through an appropriate form of open schooling, more people can access schooling opportunities regardless of their individual circumstances, including their sex or gender.

Open schools are more open about what to study, when to study, how to study and when and how to be assessed.

Learners in open schools frequently take fewer subjects at any one time and may stop out at intervals to take care of other issues, before returning to continue their studies. This flexibility can contribute to greater attainment overall.

Open schooling is usually more affordable in terms of fees, textbooks, transport etc. and, of course, there is no need for a uniform.

Increasingly, a tablet pre-loaded with interactive digital OER is cheaper and more convenient than supplying printed textbooks.

During the Covid pandemic, COL's OS partners shared the OER they had developed to support out-of-school learning through multiple channels.

Sometimes we still need to make use of older technologies such as television or radio broadcasting to reach as many learners as possible ...

For example, during the pandemic in Kenya, we helped to develop short curriculum-based videos. These reached about 150,000 learners and teachers during each broadcast and more than 220,000 people accessed the YouTube backups in the first year.

Sometimes, however, we have taken the school to the community, rather than waiting for the learners to come to us.

In Nigeria for example, we engaged with local communities in their own languages to create bite-size resources based on training needs identified by the communities.

We made use of narrow-casting to let people know we were present.

And we got to communities where roads were poor or non-existent using motorbikes.

As always, different approaches are needed in different contexts.

And always there is need to accommodate PWD.

It is estimated 90% of children with disabilities in the developing world do not attend school. The main reasons for learners with disabilities not accessing education or dropping out from school are the absence of the physical infrastructure they require, the lack of even minimal support services, such as special education teachers, and the lack of therapy services.

For some PWD, ODL is actually a more supportive environment, allowing them to study from home using appropriate technology.

But we also need to explore how we can use technology to scale provision.

In this area, NIOS has been a leader.

Back in 2017, it trained 1.4 million elementary school teachers in a single cohort.

It was also one of the first open schools to offer vocational courses and assessment on demand.

These are important innovations which NIOS can share with others in the Commonwealth.

More learners now have access to mobile devices which challenges us to find ways to make best use of the technology and mitigate the risks.

For example, learners might come to a Wi-Fi-enabled centre to download multimedia learning content to their own devices so they can study digital content offline.

And mobile social media can be used for marketing ODL courses but also for learning support.

It is good also to have a national repository where learners and teachers can access curriculum-aligned OER.

In this example from Nigeria, a lot of the resources are available in local languages rather than in English.

Short online courses leading to micro credentials that will be recognised by employers and other education partners can help us to bridge the skills gap.

An example is the huge interest in Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Modules.

In the Pacific, for example, the University of Samoa partnered with COL to develop and test a bot which could address systems queries raised by students.

We also piloted such a bot in another Pacific Open course, where the focus was on the course content.

The bots in both cases substantially reduced the number of queries which needed to be addressed by human tutors.

Augmented and Virtual Reality offer ways of addressing STEM and vocational learning at a distance.

When you get these slides, you will be able to click on the links to some papers which were presented at PCF10 in Calgary.

Gamification can also help the learning process – the Khan Academy was an early adopter of instant automated feedback, badging and real-time dashboards ...

Now we also have new wearable technologies whose application to enrich educational provision we need to explore.

We also need to explore how we can automate assessment feedback in meaningful ways that go beyond the simple knowledge quizzes we have grown used to ... we need to assess learners in ways that help to build the competences needed for the future.

We can utilise a much wider array of assessment options such as blogs and e-portfolios as well as ways of reviewing e.g. self-, peer- and tutor- review and feedback ...

We can then use feedback from assessment to inform more adaptive learning processes.

Such processes can increasingly be automated using large language modules etc. and provision of content in open textbooks with built in inclusivity formats ...

... as well as support for different languages and academic language skills ...

We also need to think about how to protect the system.

A broken fibre-optic cable in Tonga, taught us that we need to back up our content in both the cloud and in local cloudlets ...

These are some ideas about areas in which we might work together ... let me now hand back to Prof Scott for his final remarks.

Professor Peter Scott...

Thank you, Tony.

As we have seen there are several areas in which we might collaborate to innovate.

Think about which of these issues you might like to explore and then send us proposals for how we might work together on some of these issues.

And we would also like to receive your feedback on our new ODL Observatory.

Let us know what you like or don't like, and also what you think we might do to make it more supportive of your innovations in ODL.

We thank you for the opportunity to share these ideas with you.

We trust you will enjoy the conference ...

And that we will hear from some of you after the conference about how you think we might work together after the conference.