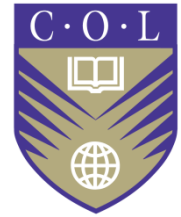


Trends in Online Education



Video Presentation, Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University (VMOU) India, Foundation Day, 23 July 2013

*By Professor Asha Kanwar
Commonwealth of Learning*

Transcript

I am very pleased to send a message for the Foundation Day celebrations of the Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University. Initially called the Kota Open University, the institution was established in 1987, the same year that the Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Vancouver and decided to set up the Commonwealth of Learning or COL. The Kota Open University was later renamed after the great religious reformer of the sixth century BC, Vardhman Mahaveer who believed that the class or caste of an individual does not matter—a person becomes great through his or her deeds.

Education helps us to realize our full potential. Many people in our remote villages and towns do not have access to quality education. In ‘A study on the development of the state open universities in India’ commissioned by COL in 2007, when asked about its plan for future growth, VMOU responded ‘our plan is to reach the unreached’. VMOU has been providing opportunities to thousands of men and women who are very diverse in terms of age and social background. So if the student cannot reach the institution, the institution reaches the student in remote rural locations through flexible programmes. As the need for education increases around the world, the role of open and distance learning will become more important than ever before.

India, like many developing countries of the Commonwealth, believes in open and distance learning. Today, Asia has 70 open universities. India alone has 14 open universities and about 150 dual mode universities catering to nearly 24% of those who enter higher education.

What impact will the growth of technologies have on ODL? Let me outline three recent trends.

The first trend has been a huge increase in online provision. In 2010, 31% of all US Higher Education students were taking at least one course online. As technologies become more accessible even developing countries will move towards more online provision. Asia has a high percentage of online enrolments with Vietnam leading at 44% and Malaysia close behind at 39%. As Rajasthan gets enhanced connectivity, offering online courses becomes a real possibility for VMOU. But as research has shown, the success of distance learning in the developing world has been to adopt blended approaches rather than purely online provision.

The second trend is the rise of Open Education Resources or OER. What are OER? As we know, OER are educational materials that are free and freely available, have open licenses and are reusable without having to seek the permission of the original author. OER can increase access, improve quality and lower costs. In India, we have NPTEL, the Indian Government's OER project. The engineering materials developed by the IIT faculty are available free under this project and are being used in over 600 engineering colleges all over the country. These remote colleges do not have access to well stocked libraries or other resources. Both teachers and students are benefitting from the free content. Similarly there are hundreds of courses available as OER around the world, which we can adopt and adapt to suit our needs. The use of OER can help open universities save both course-authoring time and money. Now that high quality content is available as OER, the emphasis can shift to providing quality support services. There are many studies which show that effective learner support can improve retention and success rates. This will be the key differentiator between the best and the rest.

Let us now come to the third major development that has captured global headlines. This is the phenomenon of the Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs. What is a MOOC? MOOCs are usually free of charge; designed for large numbers; encourage peer to peer learning and meant to award completion certificates rather than course credits.

Stanford University offered a free course in artificial intelligence in 2011 which registered 160,000 students from nearly all countries of the world, of which 23,000 completed the course. Other institutions in USA have started offering MOOCs whereby 100s of thousands of students are reached. Participants are mostly from North America and Europe with little participation from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Completion rates have been less than 10%. It is interesting that MOOCs are being offered by elite institutions and star faculty members.

What does this mean for smaller institutions in the developing world? MOOCs offer an opportunity for these institutions to find a niche for themselves and become global players. For example, VMOU could offer free coaching for the civil service or other competitive exams using a MOOC platform. The bigger MOOCs in the US do not offer support services or credentials. If VMOU were to offer both, it could well reach the unreached with quality higher education.

ODL institutions have always been known for their flexibility, openness, modular approach and curricular offerings linked to the labour market. Recent developments demonstrate that ODL institutions will need to revisit the principles of openness and reclaim their pioneering spirit. It is only then that we will be able to harness emergent opportunities to cater to the rapidly changing needs of our society.

With that, let me wish VMOU every success as you go forward.