

When going against the tide becomes the norm: the case of CILL at the University of Mauritius

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Abstract

Described as the “single great new development in education” (Wedemeyer, 1981:60), distance education would further expand with the advent of technology and the internet in the 1990’s. It can be argued that COVID-19 in 2020 has acted as another catalyst for bringing online and blended learning to the front scene (Zhao, 2020). At the University of Mauritius, distance education and online learning were introduced at the University of Mauritius in 1991 and 2001 respectively. Since 2014, online and blended learning is under the purview of the Centre for Innovative and Lifelong learning: CILL provides infrastructural and pedagogical support for the development of online and blended learning and has the autonomy to initiate projects. This has led to the creation of a sub- culture at CILL where CILL would continue to operate on the margin/periphery of the mainstream activities of the UoM. Innovations at CILL included innovative modes of delivery, assessment and adopting an entrepreneurial/intrapreneurial culture of collegially approaching the Industry for customised training programmes and corporate training solutions. These innovations were most of the time being limited to the activities of CILL. COVID-19 has since 2020 led to a reversal of the situation. COVID-19 has highlighted how many of the innovations introduced by CILL some 25 years ago have ensured robustness and resilience of the Centre’s activities in the face of disruptions caused by the pandemic. Post-lockdown, some of the models would be deployed to the whole of the University. This paper, through exploratory desk research, will explore how these innovations paved the way for preparedness at CILL and how these were escalated to University-wide level, where ‘going against the tide’ becomes the norm.

Keywords: online and blended learning, COVID-19, building resilience and robustness, case study

INTRODUCTION

At the University of Mauritius, distance education and online learning, introduced in 1991 and 2001 respectively, is under the purview of the Centre for Innovative and Lifelong learning (CILL). CILL provides infrastructural and pedagogical support for the development of online and blended learning and has the autonomy to initiate projects. This has however led to the creation of a subculture where CILL would continue to operate on the margin/periphery of the mainstream activities of the UoM. Innovations at CILL included innovative modes of delivery, assessment and adopting an entrepreneurial/intrapreneurial culture of collegially approaching the Industry for customised training programmes and corporate training solutions. These innovations were most of the time limited to the activities of CILL. COVID-19 has highlighted how many of the innovations introduced by CILL some 25 years ago have ensured robustness and resilience of the Centre’s activities in the face of disruptions caused by the pandemic. This paper, through exploratory desk research, explores how these innovations paved the way for preparedness at CILL and how these were escalated to University-wide level, where ‘going against the tide’ becomes the norm.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Unprecedented disruptions have been caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in all major sectors and the educational ecosystem has not been spared. The rapid spread of the virus has caused total lockdowns in many countries, thus affecting over 1.5 billion students globally in April 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). This

situation has compelled schools and universities to quickly develop new strategies to adapt to the “new normality” (Tesar, 2020) by shifting from the traditional face to face teaching to online teaching methods and formats. The educational style in universities has been reshaped as higher educational institutions (HEIs) had to undergo significant changes at different levels including management and working systems to accommodate the needs of the changing teaching and learning processes (Karakose, 2021). While this migration to online and virtual teachings has been reported to be easier for tertiary institutions in many developed nations (Langford & Damşa, 2000), it was a challenging time for developing countries to rapidly adopt and/or consolidate the use of technology in ways that improve access and quality. In their study, Jandrić et al (2021) presented the emergency remote teaching and learning as a survival reflex, and that both educators and students have learned to adapt to the changing teaching and learning requirements caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Hodges et al. (2020) the primary objective of this emergency remote learning during the crisis was to make instructions and instructional supports reliably accessible and in a manner that was quick to set up. Moving educational instruction online has enabled flexibility of teaching and learning anywhere and anytime, but the issue of quality remains questionable. Numerous researchers over time and prior to COVID-19, have studied and presented theories, models, standards, and evaluation criteria for quality online teaching and learning as well as online course design. Branch and Dousay (2015) state that, based on research, effective online learning is the result of a combination of informed instructional design and a systematic model for planning, design and development that impacts on the quality of online instruction. For the authors, it is this careful consideration of different design decisions and processes that are absent in most cases of emergency shifts. In fact, post-COVID-19 research highlights several challenges in the emergency education ecosystem during the pandemic such as the “weakness of online teaching infrastructure, the limited exposure of teachers to online teaching, the information gap, non-conducive environment for learning at home, equity and academic excellence in terms of higher education” (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

However, despite all the challenges, the crisis has created a remarkable opportunity to reimagine innovative modes of learning in HEIs in times of both calm and crisis. This situation has driven the academics to adopt and adapt new models of learning and to innovate beyond the classroom resulting in a dramatic increase in student use of digital tools and platforms for educational purposes. Similar trends have been identified in HEIs in Mauritius wherein the conventional teaching model is being transformed to “one driven by technology, capacity building of academic and non-academic staff, inciting them to be more technology savvy, and more importantly, innovation in teaching pedagogies” (HEC, 2021). In the post-pandemic situation, Rashid and Yadav (2020) argue that online education may become an integral part of the higher education system. In their research, they highlighted the need for HEIs to plan and devise post-pandemic strategies to “ensure student learning outcomes and standards of educational quality”. If the pandemic has changed higher education in the short term, it is also fueling long term thinking where new structures and practices strengthen the resilience of education systems in a henceforth different and uncertain reality in face of different types of crises.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT: ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MAURITIUS- FROM THE 1990’S TILL DATE

Founded in 1965, the UoM is the oldest public university in Mauritius, with seven faculties and a student population of 10,000 at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Set up as a developmental university, it has since 2017 positioned itself as “a research engaged and entrepreneurial university” (UoM, 2020). Being a traditional university with face to face teaching as its main mode of delivery since its inception, the UoM started experimenting with distance learning in the early 1990’s. A separate Centre,

the Centre for Extra Mural Studies (CEMS) was created in 1993. CEMS was responsible to identify large cohort modules that were common across different faculties (such as Basic Information technology, Communication Skills, Mathematics, and Management) and reengineer them into print-based self-instructional materials. These were complemented with face to face tutorials in smaller groups of students and shorter sessions. The Centre was renamed Centre for Distance Learning in 1996 but CDL was still acting as a 'support' to other faculties by converting large cohort modules.

In 2001, the VCILT (Virtual Centre for Innovative Learning Technologies) was set up, specialising in online learning. Modules were converted to online mode and there were many project-based initiatives.

What acted as a lever for the activities and status of both Centres was the setting of the Lifelong Learning Cluster (LLC) in 2004: the LLC, grouping CDL, VCILT and CITS(Centre for [Information Technology and Systems-CITS](#)) was a virtual structure that gave the centres the same powers as a faculty to initiate and offer programmes through its own academic board and also to approach the industry for projects. Through the LLC, projects were launched with major government institutions and private companies and content experts were recruited from other faculties while the core team was the technical and administrative staff of both centres that was ensuring follow up and continuity in the activities. CDL was again renamed Centre for Professional Development and Lifelong Learning (CPDL) in 2005 to reflect its enhanced mandate in the field of lifelong learning.

To further optimise on University resources, VCILT and CPDL merged in 2014 to become the Centre for Innovative and Lifelong Learning (CILL) which acts as a one-stop shop for the design and development of modules and programmes for lifelong learners, using innovative modes of teaching and learning. CILL is now positioning itself as a trusted and serious provider of online/blended learning programmes and has as clients the Mauritius Police Force, Mauritius Export Association (representing import and export companies in Mauritius), the Mauritius Ports Authority, and insurance companies. Many of these organisations and companies have been loyal to the then ex-CPDL and ex-VCILT and have trusted the new entity - CILL. The cooperation with these companies and public organisations can in fact go back to the late 1990's, representing 25 years of collaboration. It has to be highlighted that since the introduction of distance and online learning at the UoM in the early 1990's, a lot of emphasis has always been laid on capacity building of both academic and technical staff. This has led to a situation where there are trained academics in online and blended learning in all Faculties and at CILL.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we will discuss how CILL has often been perceived as not part of mainstream education and how the situation changed post-COVID-19, in terms of perception, and in terms of the models that the centre was built on and that became more accepted and were adopted at University level.

This paper will :

1. Conduct a brief literature review of the potential of online and blended learning, pre and post-COVID-19.
2. Present a brief history on the setting up of CILL so as to better understand the context.
3. Discuss what we mean by going against the tide.
4. Analyse the various philosophies and models that guide CILL that can now help the UoM become even more resilient and prepared post-COVID-19.

This paper shall use exploratory desk research method: official documents from different sources: the University of Mauritius, Annual Reports, Senate papers and Strategic Plans, in order to gauge the following:

- Explore the discourse about online and blended learning in the official discourse of the UoM with regards to perception and acceptance about online and blended learning;
- Identify/churn out philosophies and models developed by CILL that demonstrate use of innovative methods and strategies that will ensure robustness and preparedness post-COVID-19 and beyond.

WHY IS CILL PERCEIVED AS GOING AGAINST THE TIDE?

- **Distance and Online Learning Footprint at the University of Mauritius**

Distance and online learning has a 30-year old presence at the University of Mauritius and till date less than 5 programmes, under the CILL, can be considered as fully online programmes. Other programmes of CILL are mostly on blended learning mode, especially the commissioned courses for the industry. In terms of distance and online learning footprint (ie, in terms of having fully online programmes and number of students enrolled in such programmes), and despite 30 years of existence, the contribution of CILL can be considered as relatively modest. However, when we do talk about mostly blended/hybrid models, the contribution is more impressive. Hence, it seems that there is still some reticence to embrace fully online programmes whereas blended/hybrid models are relatively more accepted.

- **Analysing Primary Documents of UoM to gauge Distance and Online Learning Status in the Institutional Discourse:**

To analyse the perception of online and blended learning in the UoM official discourse, we have chosen to peruse through the annual reports of the UoM to extract the university's discourse about distance and online learning over the period: 1993, 1996, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2014, representing milestone dates for CILL (including ex-CDL/CPDL, ex-LLC and ex-VCILT and CILL).

Analysis of Annual Reports reveal that the early 1990's were the years where the University started to align itself in a systematic manner to the following concepts: semesterisation, credit system, QA policies and eventually distance education. The semester and credit systems were prerequisites to facilitate the conversion to distance and online learning mode, large cohort modules that cut across faculties to ensure standardisation of content. So for the period till 2004 the main focus was on the standardisation process, and conversion of a pre-identified list of modules to DE mode. During this period there was a lot of emphasis on training of technical, administrative and academic staff on QA, and online and distance learning. Once a pool of modules were converted on DE mode, and mostly in management and social sciences fields, the next step was to use the modules to mount programmes of studies. In 2005, the renaming of the Centre as CPDL was seen as part of a 'strategic direction', to address emerging challenges in the higher education sector. VCILT was focussed on online learning and even organised the first International Conference on Open and online Learning (2003) and setting up of the LLC, considered as a "strategic move", allowed both centres to launch innovative programmes.

As from 2014, when CILL had secured itself more strongly as a provider of innovative and lifelong learning, with more students on blended and online learning courses, it was also diversifying its portfolio in terms of its impact and presence in the lifelong learning niche with new projects, new partnerships and all being income generating projects for the UoM.

When we analyse the trend in student intake (Table 1) and compare it with number of staff posted CILL over the years (Table 2) , we notice that though the core technical staff members have remained more or less constant, there has been a drastic cut in the number of administrative and supporting staff, limiting the Centre’s ability to expand further. Though this decision could be prompted by the need to optimise University resources, it also means that CILL is being asked to do more with less. Technical staff have had to take up the over programme coordination to ensure that for commissioned programmes, there was proper monitoring and follow-up, especially when it came to liaising with the client.

Table 1: Admissions at the CILL, University of Mauritius									
2004/2005	2005/2006	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
144	120	413	984 ¹	264	307	52	638	75	567 ²
Creation of Lifelong learning Cluster Renaming of CDL as CPDL to add “lifelong Learning”		Prior to Merge of CPDL and VCILT	Merged Centre: Centre for Innovative and Lifelong Learning						

¹ Sharp increase in intake due to the launch of the fresh cohorts for the Mauritius Police Force: 3 programmes were launched

² No yearly intake of 360 students for the Certificate in Police Duties (targeting Police Officers) due to COVID19 pandemic and exigencies of service of these front liners. Hence low admission compared to previous year.

Source: University of Mauritius Annual Reports, 2004-2020

Table 2: Staff posted at the Centre for Innovative and Lifelong Learning				
	Pre Merge: 2013		Staff of CILL in 2014 (merged centre)	Situation in 2022
	CPDL	VCILT		
Officer in Charge	1 (also part of technical staff)	1 (also part of academic staff)	1 (also part of academic staff)	1 (also part of academic staff)
Academic Staff	1	4	4	3
Technical staff	3	5	7	6
Administrative /Support Staff	14	5	13	7

Source: University of Mauritius Annual Reports, 2013-2021, and figures from CILL for 2022

- **Innovations that remained at the level of CILL instead of being mainstreamed at University Level**

A number of innovations have been initiated by CILL:

- *The very innovative mode of delivery*: The modes are on a spectrum at CILL, being project and audience-specific. Delivery modes range from fully online and appealing to foreign students to flipped classroom models.
- *Innovative assessment*: Since the early 2010's, CILL has been assessing students on coursework only: normal programmes are assessed as follows: 30 % coursework and 70 final exams though there are a few exemptions. Innovative modes of assessment include use of reflective portfolios, development of prototypes, having more group work, activities that enable students to develop their critical, reflective and collaborative learning. In commissioned programmes, modules fully assessed by coursework enable students to tap from their repertoire of skills, competencies and knowledge and groom them as reflective practitioners.
- *Innovative Learning Design*: An attempt at co-creation along with students and industry stakeholders has also been initiated for a module on Transdisciplinary Skills and Competencies. This module will be made available as an Open Educational Resources and aims at breaking down silos and having different departments collaborate around common and novel areas of interest.
- *Opening University to New Profile of Learners*: Since 2018, some commissioned programmes admit students through the accreditation of prior learning, which is a premiere for UoM.
- *Lean structure*: Through LLC and CILL in 2014, given that the programmes offered are from different disciplines, more resource persons from different faculties were being immersed into the online/blended learning paradigm and concepts: learner-centredness, constructive alignment, flipped classroom, innovative modes of assessment, use of learning management systems (LMSs), and accreditation of prior learning. Thus the very model of LLC and then CILL, that is lean model and forming and unforming teams based on projects, had a ripple effect on the different Faculties too.
- *Entrepreneurial /intrapreneurial nature*: CILL, having an autonomy to run its own projects, also encourages staff to develop intrapreneurial mindset and both academic and technical staff are encouraged to submit projects for consideration at the CILL board. With projects targeting rich and heterogeneous profiles of students, campus life has been enriched with new perspectives, and development of new pedagogies and approaches. By opening up the UoM to such differences and diversity, the commissioned programmes are aligning the UoM to the SDG 4 which is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

From Border to Centre: Mainstreaming Philosophies and Models from CILL

We have referred to these two documents to try to elicit the position of UoM just before COVID-19 hit the island and post-COVID19 lockdown in 2020.

- Vision and Strategic Orientations of the University of Mauritius (UoM, 2018): this document lays a lot of emphasis on the entrepreneurial university, characterised by “*proactivity, innovativeness, capacity to assume risk and manage change*” (UoM, 2018), helping the UoM, to “building the human, intellectual, entrepreneurial and social capital needed for our country

to meet the challenges of Industry 4.0” (UoM, 2018). In that vision, action measures included “University-Business/External Relationship for Knowledge Exchange”. CILL, as argued earlier, has since 2014 emerged as an innovative, proactive and risk taking unit of the UoM, that was reaching out to new niches in the field of lifelong learning and becoming an income generator for the University.

- Extracts from the Digital Learning and Transformation Strategy: Enhancing Preparedness of the Academic Community: UoM, 2020), mention the following :

- *Furthermore, from the lessons learnt from Covid-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to rethink about teaching and learning, the modes of delivery, and student assessment to ensure that quality is maintained, learning is meaningful and relevant to the new context while at the same time, ensuring safety and health of university personnel and their students. This will help the University to be better prepared to deal with similar situations (for e.g. closure of University due to pandemics, torrential rains, flash flooding, cyclones etc.) in the future.*

Other parts of the document discuss the following:

- *“Consider a phased approach to embrace blended learning model:*
- *“review mechanisms for students evaluation and assessment”*
- *“capacity building of academics and administrative staff (and) training on pedagogies” related to learning design, online pedagogy and student assessment”*

This Strategy seems thus to align to the philosophy of CILL: new delivery modes and assessment, training. COVID-19 can be said to have reinstated online and blended learning at the UoM as a viable, efficient mode of delivery that is based on sound pedagogy, and trained staff.

In fact, according to Davies (2021), the future seems very likely to adopt “a pandemic-induced move” towards a ‘new’ hybrid era that mixes online and in-person studies.

CONCLUSION

A researcher notes that “the enterprise and flexibility are the key values needed for universities to succeed in the rapidly changing culture of higher education system (UQA, 2001),” where technology does not drive education rather, educational goals and needs drive the use of technology (Tinio, 2002).

COVID-19 has created new educational goals and needs and what we have seen is that CILL, operating as a subculture of the UoM, has been embracing a mindset and approach that when deployed at university-level, can enhance the preparedness and robustness of the University.

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