Bridging employment gaps through technology

In a rapidly evolving global economy, the pressing demand for a skilled workforce is escalating. Concurrently, the orientation of tertiary education towards employment is becoming indispensable to ensure the seamless transition of learners into jobs and careers. The intersection of education and technology presents a potent solution to expedite this shift and address the burgeoning and diverse demands of multiple sectors.

Various kinds of computer-mediated reality, including augmented and virtual reality, have the potential to improve skill development outcomes in specific learning situations. Another noteworthy advancement in tertiary education is the potential for integrating artificial intelligence (AI), which is poised to play a pivotal role in teaching for employment. AI can help tailor curricula to meet the dynamic demands of the job market, thus ensuring learners are equipped with job-ready skills upon graduation. Furthermore, AI-powered platforms can offer real-time insights into students’ performance and learning trajectories, so educators can make data-driven decisions that enhance the efficacy of their teaching methodologies. This, in turn, can significantly contribute to aligning educational outcomes with employment opportunities.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is at the vanguard of promoting and supporting innovative technologies to increase access to education and improve employment prospects, particularly in resource-limited regions of the Commonwealth. By fostering learning ecosystems where technology, education and employment intersect, COL is supporting the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), thereby contributing significantly to building a more inclusive and sustainable global workforce.

This paradigm shift, powered by AI and other technological advancements, offers a promising pathway to not only accelerate the growth of a skilled workforce but also fortify the symbiotic relationship between tertiary education and employment.

By fostering learning ecosystems where technology, education and employment intersect, COL is supporting the achievement of SDG4.
Empowering Women & Girls in Mozambique and Malawi

COL’s Empowering Women and Girls project, supported by Global Affairs Canada, was launched in both Malawi and Mozambique. Ms Zoe Boutilier, Education Team Lead at the Canadian High Commission in Maputo, along with Ms Birgit Holm, CEO of Aid for the Development of People for People (ADPP) spoke at the event in Machava, Mozambique.

At ADPP headquarters, over 60 stakeholders attended, including representatives from the country’s ministries of education, health and gender, leaders from communities where the project will be implemented, and representatives from the private sector and microcredit organisations. The project aims to assist 9,000 women and girls. Ms Frances Ferreira, COL’s Senior Adviser: Empowering Women and Girls, said the project’s approach is guided by the principle of inclusion to ensure groups with a higher likelihood of poverty – women, girls and persons with disabilities – are empowered to voice their concerns.

Ms Noria Nchingula, Director of Open, Distance and eLearning at the Ministry of Education, launched the project in Blantyre, Malawi. In attendance were project partners Concerned Youth Organisation and Centre for Research and Development Initiative, as well as city and district council officials, civil society organisations, women’s and girl’s rights organisations and local media.

Speaking on behalf of the city, Mr Lytton Stan Nkata, Director of Administrative Services, commended COL for launching the project.

Embracing innovations and action

In collaboration with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, COL’s Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) organised the State Open University Vice-Chancellors’ Forum in August 2023 in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. The theme was “National Education Policy 2020: Opportunities and Challenges for Open and Distance Learning Universities.”

Speaking at the forum, COL President and CEO, Professor Asha Kanwar, emphasised that NEP 2020’s goal of achieving increased access, equity and inclusion in higher education is only possible through open and distance learning (ODL). Given the magnitude of future challenges, open universities need to pool their expertise and resources and work towards common goals.

The forum included several plenary sessions and panel discussions exploring various aspects of the ODL landscape, including reaching underserved learners, leveraging technology for enhanced ODL, implementing the Academic Bank of Credits, establishing the National Credit Framework, addressing recognition and acceptance issues, promoting employability, and ensuring the resilience and sustainability of open universities.

COL at Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting

Under the theme “Skilling our Youth: Role of Partnerships,” Professor Kanwar delivered a virtual address to the Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting in London, UK, in mid-September 2023.

Regarding the need for leadership in technology for youth skilling, COL’s President commented, “COL responds to some of the most pressing challenges by providing learning opportunities that lead to livelihoods. It leverages its impact through partnerships with intergovernmental organisations, regional bodies, ministries, the corporate sector and civil society. The biggest area of explosive growth is AI, with a major impact on future jobs.”

Skilling our youth: role of partnerships
education is a system that leverages modern science and technology to enhance learning experiences and educational quality.

Professor Kanwar remarked in her keynote address: “Since smart education addresses the goals of SDG4, intergovernmental organisations such as COL and UNESCO can provide advocacy and policy support.” She also reflected on the transformative potential of smart education in the context of lifelong learning and explored how smart education can be sustainable, meaningful, accessible, resilient and transformative.

COL President receives ICDE Honorary Membership

Professor Kanwar was awarded an International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) Honorary Membership at the 29th ICDE World Conference in Costa Rica. Following a pre-recorded video message, Dr Tony Mays, COL Education Specialist: Open Schooling, who was in attendance to deliver a keynote, accepted this on her behalf.

COL at CANQATE 2023

COL was invited to deliver one of the two plenary addresses at the 19th Annual General Meeting of the Caribbean Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (CANQATE 2023). This hybrid event brought together about 200 participants from institutions, training agencies and ministries in 15 countries. COL’s Vice President, Dr V. Balaji, spoke about the significant developments in generative AI for workforce development. In a special address to attendees, the Honourable Nigel de Freitas, Acting President of Trinidad and Tobago, emphasised the importance of rapid workforce development to improve and sustain the economic advancement of societies in the region.

COL keynote address at AAOU 2023

Professor Kanwar presented a keynote address to the 36th Asian Association of Open Universities Annual Conference (AAOU 2023) in Istanbul, Türkiye, in September 2023. In “The Future of Open Universities: A Comprehensive Overview,” the President and CEO of COL acknowledged the growth and development of open universities, then explained how they have contributed to national development and enhanced access to higher education, most notably for marginalised communities and persons with disabilities. The address outlined five future pathways for open universities: promoting a culture of lifelong learning, personalising learning through technological innovations, collaborating with the labour market for job-specific courses, integrating multiple literacies into curricula and addressing environmental sustainability.
Mauritius Vice PM attends special needs ceremony

Professor Kanwar delivered a keynote address at COL’s Skills for Work awards ceremony to recognise the outstanding achievements of Special Education Needs Authority educators and “underscore the profound significance of special education needs in Mauritius’ educational landscape.” She was joined by the Honourable Mrs Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun, Vice-Prime Minister.

Skills training online for special needs educators is a collaboration between the Higher Education Commission Mauritius and the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, and Scientific Research, supported by COL. In the last two years, over 3,000 students received COL scholarships to study more than 10,000 courses online.

High-level roundtable for vice chancellors

Professor Kanwar welcomed 24 attendees from 12 countries to the Roundtable for Vice Chancellors and Senior Officials, held at the Open University of Mauritius and co-hosted by the university and COL.

The two-day roundtable discussions centred around four key themes, each facilitated by a panel of experts, which emphasised the need for educational institutions to adapt to changing demographics and evolving student population needs. The expected outcomes were specifically designed to aid in refining overall approaches to technology, quality assurance, climate change and leadership.

The roundtable’s primary objective was to engage higher education leaders in constructive dialogue to formulate proactive strategies for positioning universities effectively in the face of global disruptions. Recommendations included embracing technological innovations like generative artificial intelligence, utilising data effectively, supporting a green learning agenda and building upon effective leadership practices for increased institutional efficiency and effectiveness.

Assistive technologies training in the Caribbean

A partnership between COL and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States has improved 50 educators’ capacity to evaluate, select and use assistive technologies as instructional support for students with special requirements. Participants from seven Caribbean countries and territories gathered with leaders and senior members of their ministries for a virtual graduation ceremony.

The training focused on technologies that are accessible and affordable, to avoid widening existing inequalities. Ms Jessica Jacobie, from Saint Lucia, shared her experience as a Vision Education Support Teacher who is herself visually impaired.

CEMBA/CEMPA Boards meet

Professor Kanwar presided over the 15th session of the Executive Governing Board for the Commonwealth Executive MBA and MPA Programmes (CEMBA/CEMPA), hosted by the Open University of Mauritius. The convergence included the Executive and Academic Board meetings, with vice chancellors and delegates from different countries of the Commonwealth.

The Academic Board was composed of representatives from 11 countries: Bangladesh, Botswana, the Cayman Islands, Guyana, Jamaica, Malaysia, Mauritius, Nigeria, Pakistan, Seychelles and Sri Lanka. In parallel, the Executive Governing Board comprised representatives from nine countries: Bangladesh, Botswana, the Cayman Islands, Guyana, Jamaica, Malaysia, Mauritius, Nigeria and Seychelles.

Discussions at the Executive Governing Board affirmed the Academic Board’s decisions, delving into enrolment statistics, trends and strategies for the CEMBA/CEMPA Programmes’ advancement. The session yielded constructive commentary on recent curricular revisions, leading to the approval of nine updated courses. Initially established through a collaboration with four open universities in Asia in 2002, the CEMBA/CEMPA Programmes have flourished, now offered through 12 partner institutions across Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.
Training of Trainers in OER

COL supported a three-day ‘Training of Trainers’ workshop on open educational resources (OER) in Mauritius at the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology in June 2023.

Mauritius adopted a national OER policy in 2022, developed with COL’s assistance. The workshop was a follow-up on the policy’s implementation. The ministry had identified building local capacity as a priority, along with establishing a national OER repository. The training was facilitated by Dr Sanjaya Mishra, COL’s Director: Education, and covered finding, remixing and creating OER, plus a conceptual foundation in copyright and open licensing. Twenty-two participants from ten institutions at all levels of education participated to develop skills as trainers.

CEMCA workshop on OER

In partnership with Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), Guwahati, Assam, India, CEMCA organised a three-day workshop in early October on OER.

The primary aim was to empower KKHSOU faculty with the essential skills to explore, adopt and create OER and seamlessly integrate them into their teaching and learning. By the workshop’s conclusion, faculty members had created an OER repository for KKHSOU teachers, students and the wider OER community.

Reforming boys’ education in Tonga

In Tonga, increasing attention is being paid to boys’ underperformance and disengagement in school, their involvement in crime and high levels of unemployment.

To better understand the complexity surrounding these social issues, COL undertook a study on the underachievement of boys in Tonga to investigate factors affecting boys’ participation, performance and learning outcomes in school. The study is crucial for developing intervention strategies, promoting gender equality and attaining better learning outcomes for boys.

The researchers engaged over 450 stakeholders through surveys and interviews with parents, teachers, boys, community members and staff of the Ministry for Education and Training. The results highlight the need to continually assess how gender equality plays out as society evolves and how to be diligent in actively engaging all stakeholders.

Community capacity building, Namibia

COL is supporting the training of communities in Namibia to meet local needs while addressing environmental issues and climate change through sustainable agricultural practices. The Khomas Directorate of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning is partnering with COL’s GIRLS Inspire initiative to offer literacy, entrepreneurship and livelihood skills to women and girls, including persons with disabilities, in ten districts of the Khomas region.

Through the project, COL is offering young women an opportunity for empowerment through self-employment. The trainers are uniquely placed to transform participants’ lives, as they have expertise in adult and lifelong learning and can expand the training to include farm machinery repair, pottery, general carpentry and plumbing.
COL at CANTA 2023

At a regional meeting of the Caribbean Network for National Training Agencies (CANTA) in Grenada, education leaders underscored the urgency of further developing pedagogy and embedding skills training at all levels.

The collaboration of CANTA with COL has helped refine Caribbean Vocational Qualifications guidelines and yielded two new occupational standards for the blue economy. The conference also strategised on the creation and expansion of specialised TVET courseware within the member states. The meeting, which included representatives from 13 Caribbean nations, focused on advancing TVET via the development, trial and broad dissemination of courseware in CANTA countries, in alignment with COL’s strategic objectives.

Samoa pioneers AI-powered learner support

Providing sustained, high-quality support to online learners can be challenging for small island countries of the Pacific, especially in resource-constrained situations. Yet insufficient support can impede learner progress.

Recent advances in generative artificial intelligence (AI) could help. During the pandemic, COL research showed that up to a quarter of online learner queries are about the learning management system. In this context, AI technology such as Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) offers solutions.

COL has collaborated with the National University of Samoa to conduct a pilot project on providing online learner support using GPT-powered technology. Initial results from the pilot reveal over 85 per cent accuracy in AI-powered responses, affirming its efficacy in improving learner support.

Digital media for open schooling in Eswatini

COL is supporting the Emlalatini Development Centre (EDC), in Eswatini, to migrate from a print-based to a digital and blended model of open schooling provision.

As part of this process, COL supported the acquisition of technical equipment to establish a media development centre, along with staff training to create digital educational media using the new equipment.

COL noted that while the move into the virtual space represents a profound shift for EDC, it will contribute to greater resilience in the schooling system in the face of future challenges to traditional schooling, such as another pandemic or the growing incidence of climate change-related disruptions.

Micro-credentials can bridge education and job market

CEMCA participated in a panel on the future of credentialing at the South Zone Vice Chancellors’ Meeting, emphasising the importance of micro-credentials in bridging education and job market demands. The session, part of an event by the Association of Indian Universities, also discussed India’s National Credit Framework and COL’s at-scale, online training initiatives, including partnerships benefiting learners in Africa and Asia.
Gender-green teacher programme

COL partnered with the National Institute of Open Schooling to organise an international workshop in Noida, India, focused on the adoption of the Gender–Green Teacher (GGT) programme.

The workshop attracted 49 principals and senior professors from Africa (The Gambia, Ghana, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Uganda) and Asia (Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka).

Professor Kanwar stressed the importance of education in preparing present and future generations to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

As part of the workshop, each participating institution developed an action plan to implement the GGT programme in their respective country, ensuring the acquired knowledge and skills translate into practical teaching strategies.

Youth training in the Pacific

COL and the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD) are working with local NGOs to skill youths for employability. COL is partnering with Bougainville Youth in Agriculture, Papua New Guinea, as well as FRIEND Fiji and V-Lab, Vanuatu, to provide skills and leadership training.

From May to July 2023, 829 youths were equipped with industry-specific training that offers the potential for meaningful employment. In total, 1,479 youths have concluded this pertinent training since the initiative began last year. This activity is supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand.

**TOP 5 Tips for fostering employability skills in higher education**

Employability describes being able to gain employment. It also translates into success within a specific job. This issue is increasingly important for the dynamic higher education sector. Ensuring graduates have specific attributes, skills and knowledge can support employability. Below are five tips for higher education institutions to help foster higher employability among their graduates.

1. **DETERMINE WHAT EMPLOYABILITY MEANS FOR YOU**
   There are many views of what employability skills involve, and it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to determine what this means for them. Consequently, a research-based approach is recommended, as only through conducting tracer studies of graduates and securing sufficient data can approaches and content be realigned within institutions to address the needs of students, teachers, employers and the larger society.

2. **EMBRACE SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AND SUPPORT STUDENT AGENCY**
   In using educational strategies that promote self-directed learning, such as problem-based and co-operative learning, students may learn essential skills and become self-directed in their further self-development once they are employed. Such a method also implies a student-centred approach through which student agency can be supported within higher education institutions.

3. **FORM NETWORKS AND BE COLLABORATIVE**
   Higher education institutions must form strong networks with the labour market, professional bodies and the institution’s alumni to gauge the needs of potential employers. Only through such a collaborative approach can there be alignment between the needs of employers and the outcomes of higher education institutions.

4. **INFUSE SOFT SKILLS INTO CURRICULA**
   Soft skills, such as effective communication, problem solving, critical thinking, working well in groups, time management and leadership, can be integrated into curricula without becoming artificial add-ons. These soft skills have the potential to boost graduates’ employability.

5. **CREATE LIFELONG LEARNERS PREPARED FOR A DIGITAL WORLD**
   Within a context of ongoing technological disruption, graduates need to be prepared for constant and sometimes dramatic changes in the work world. Therefore, graduates should be supported to become lifelong learners who are not only well-qualified but also empowered to pivot from one career to another as contexts change. This also implies constant self-improvement in terms of technological skills and critical engagement with new technologies.
ODL for employability in Nigerian institutions

Recognising the disconnect between university graduates and employer expectations in Nigeria, the open and distance learning (ODL) initiative at Ladoke Akintola University of Technology (LAUTECH) has introduced innovative assessment approaches. Developed in collaboration with COL, these authentic assessment methods require students to complete complex tasks that mirror real-world challenges they are likely to encounter in their professional lives. This shift from traditional, content-based learning to activity-based assessments allows students to not only acquire academic knowledge but also develop practical skills crucial for the job market. Employers have responded positively to the transformation, as evidenced by constructive feedback received through alumni workplace assessments. The approach serves to align educational outcomes more closely with the needs of employers and the broader economy.

Yaba College of Technology, or YABATECH, in Lagos, is among the leading skills training institutions in Nigeria. The institution’s centre for open, distance, flexible and e-learning has been pivotal in skill development programmes. In collaboration with COL, YABATECH has initiated the Skills-In-Demand project, aimed at formalising apprenticeship training in the informal sector. Utilising COL’s e-apprenticeship model and employing a blended learning approach, YABATECH has successfully trained two cohorts in computer and mobile phone repair courses, involving over 200 apprentices. The initiative has garnered support from Mobile Telephone Network – Nigeria’s leading telecommunications company – highlighting the role of ODL and flexible learning in meeting employer requirements and enhancing quality apprenticeships.

Connecting QA and employability in Africa

To address the pressing issue of graduate employability in higher education institutions (HEIs), COL has formulated comprehensive guidelines and models focusing on quality assurance (QA) and employability. These tools are designed to aid educational institutions across the Commonwealth in ensuring their programmes meet the highest standards of quality and relevance.

COL’s unique employability model is structured around a cyclical framework involving assessment, planning, implementation and reflection. This approach allows HEIs to continually assess and adapt their strategies to improve students’ employability throughout their academic journeys. The model is predicated on employability being a long-term endeavour that requires constant attention and fine-tuning.

For implementation, COL employs its QA rubrics to evaluate the employability potential of programmes and courses. The employability model has already been successfully piloted in seven African nations: Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia and Zambia. The initial outcomes are promising, and further expansion to other HEIs is being considered.

Moreover, QA agencies from these seven countries have begun collecting baseline data, supported by a COL toolkit outlining key employability indicators. This collaborative approach ensures the guidelines and metrics are consistent, targeted and effective.

As the labour market continues to evolve, with some jobs disappearing and new ones emerging, it is imperative for HEIs to continually modernise their learning strategies. This will close skills gaps and equip graduates to meet the ever-changing requirements for a future-ready workforce.
In Pudukkottai, a village nestled within South India’s Theni district, resides Mrs Saroja, a 57-year-old farmer and a member of a women’s self-help group (SHG). Her journey as a lifelong learner for over 13 years epitomises the transformative power of continuous education, particularly in bolstering self-sustenance and economic resilience.

Mrs Saroja’s primary venture is backyard dairy farming – which she embarked upon in 2009 with a modest loan of 50,000 rupees procured through her SHG from the local branch of the Indian Bank. The loan facilitated the acquisition of two cows and a push-button phone. The latter unlocked the doors to a mobile learning programme that significantly bridged her knowledge gap in dairy management, enabling her to succeed and repay the loan ahead of the stipulated five-year period.

Presently, Mrs Saroja’s thriving backyard dairy comprises seven cows, yielding an average of 20 litres of milk per cow daily. This translates to a monthly income of approximately USD 230 per cow and an impressive annual income of approximately USD 2,700 per cow. Given the income levels in the local economy, this return can be considered well above the poverty line.

COL’s NGO partner, Vidiyal, facilitated the loan and the mobile learning process. The programme, which delivers daily voice messages, has been pivotal in imparting knowledge on diverse aspects of dairy management – from maintaining bovine health to adapting feeding regimes for optimal milk yield and adopting traditional treatment methods.

Mrs Saroja’s narrative accentuates the profound impact of mobile learning for enhancing agricultural practices and, by extension, livelihoods. Her tale is a resounding testament to how the synergy of communal trust, financial credibility and the indomitable spirit of lifelong learning can foster successful dairy enterprises and improve livelihoods.

Similarly, Indrajith Bandara, an instructor at CISCO Networking Academy in Sri Lanka, benefited from the COL–Coursera Skills for Work (SfW) scholarship to pursue a Google Advanced Analytics course. “I was able to complete the courses only because of the COL scholarship,” said Indrajith. He expressed gratitude to COL for transforming his life and providing opportunities and inspiration to aspiring tech professionals globally.

COL is also partnering with Better Future for Women, in Bangladesh, to implement the scholarship programme. Social media channels are designed to reach potential participants from local communities, government agencies, university grants commissions and universities.

According to 25-year-old Sumitra Rani Munda, who lives in the Sundarbans Mangrove region, the Women’s TVET Corner has opened up a world of learning and skill development opportunities. Through the Women’s TVET Corner recently established in her village, she has found many open and distance learning skill development courses in the local language.

These success stories demonstrate the tangible impact of COL’s strategic initiatives to enhance skills development and employability, reinforcing COL’s mission to increase access to quality education across the Commonwealth. The learners’ experiences shed light on the transformative potential of such initiatives for individuals, who can then become role models for expanding educational access and quality in resource-constrained settings.
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) was founded in 1982 as India’s first open university, with a vision of Education for All. Initially named Andhra Pradesh Open University, it was renamed in 1991 to honour the eminent Indian social reformer and constitutionalist, B.R. Ambedkar. Since then, the university has evolved into a cornerstone for distance education in India.

BRAOU’s service to higher education is formidable, as it caters to approximately 450,000 students across Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states through an extensive network of 137 study centres and 23 regional co-ordination centres. The university distinguishes itself by making higher education accessible to all segments of society, thereby addressing shifting societal and individual needs.

Over the past two decades, BRAOU has collaborated extensively with CEMCA, a regional entity of COL. This symbiotic relationship has been instrumental in shaping the university’s open educational resources (OER) policy and has served as an exemplary model for other open universities in Andhra Pradesh and India more widely.

The collaborative effort has been two-fold: firstly, formulating and operationalising an effective OER policy through faculty orientation and capacity building; secondly, pioneering initiatives such as micro-credentials by establishing quality standards for them. This involves the meticulous planning of course details, assessment methods and quality assurance measures.

Currently, under the leadership of Vice Chancellor Professor K. Seetharama Rao, BRAOU is leveraging three pioneering practices to augment its educational delivery:

1. The institution of a robust helpdesk to offer consultative services to learners.
2. The creation of an expansive OER repository specialising in Telugu literature and other rare materials, making it a remarkable resource.
3. The initiation of a standardised, benchmarked system for delivering high-quality, employment-driven micro-credentials in conjunction with traditional courses.

As BRAOU commemorated its 40th anniversary in open and distance learning, it launched its Online Learning Portal, offering massive open online courses (MOOCs) that are meticulously developed across four quadrants – e-content, e-tutorials, asynchronous and synchronous learning interactions, and comprehensive assessments.

COL and CEMCA have consistently supported BRAOU’s endeavours by formulating job-centric micro-credentials, thereby setting a template for other educational institutions to follow. Future collaborations will include assisting the university with integrating a blended learning approach into its curriculum.

Recently, BRAOU and COL–CEMCA have jointly offered various open online courses, including a notable MOOC on Stress Management. Additionally, BRAOU has recently joined the list of Indian universities offering CEMCA’s MOOC on course development for the SWAYAM platform, with more than 240 faculty members benefiting from it. SWAYAM is an Indian government initiative offering free online courses to a diverse learner population, aimed at fulfilling the cardinal principles of India’s Education Policy: access, equity and quality.

The Vice Chancellor underscored the transformative impact of the long-standing BRAOU and COL–CEMCA partnership, highlighting its role in making education not merely a pathway to knowledge but also a conduit for vocational aptitude. The collaboration between these two organisations continues to set benchmarks in open education, ensuring the fulfilment of academic and professional aspirations for a diverse populace.

By Professor G. Pushpa Chakrapani
Director, Centre for Online Education & Learning (COEL)
Dean, Faculty of Sciences, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University
Hyderabad, Telangana State, India

“The university distinguishes itself by making higher education accessible to all segments of society.”
**Expert committee finalises blended learning policy**

CEMCA and the Association of Indian Universities organised a meeting of the Expert Committee on National Policy on Blended Learning (NPBL) for higher education, held in New Delhi, India. The primary objective of the meeting was to finalise the draft policy – a document with substantial implications for India’s educational landscape.

Experts underscored several critical aspects of the policy document. They stressed its approach should not be excessively prescriptive but instead, open and adaptable to the diverse needs and resources of institutions, particularly those located in smaller towns and rural areas.

Bridging the digital divide in terms of access and connectivity, as well as addressing gender-based discrimination in access to digital devices, were deemed critical for its successful implementation.

**Botswana OU reviews gender policy**

In partnership with the Botswana Open University (BOU), COL held a workshop in Gaborone to build the capacity of academic administrators and staff to analyse the gender responsiveness of BOU policies and curricula. The workshop attracted 18 administrators and 24 staff.

In her opening remarks, Professor Bantu Morolong, head of the university’s Gender Mainstreaming Committee, hailed COL’s support for gender mainstreaming at BOU, which included sensitising staff on gender issues, conducting a situational analysis and developing a roadmap to guide gender mainstreaming.

COL’s open-access Guide to Gender Responsive Learning Materials Development and Learning Resources Gender Evaluation Rubric were used to evaluate three existing curricula for gender responsiveness.

**Pacific TVET toolkit workshop**

In late October, COL and the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development hosted a regional workshop in Lautoka, Fiji, on the further development of the TVET Professional Development Toolkit for the Pacific, with support from New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Twenty-eight participants from nine Pacific Commonwealth island countries attended the workshop, including officials from ministries responsible for TVET regulatory bodies, technical and vocational education trainers and industry-based trainers.

This workshop was held as part of the Pacific Partnership for Open, Distance and Flexible Learning. The online TVET toolkit was launched in 2021 for the professional development of trainers, master craftspeople and TVET leaders using informal approaches. Practitioners are anticipated to use microlearning resources from the toolkit to acquire professional skills informally.

**AgMOOCs achieve higher rate of certification**

While massive open online courses (MOOCs) have been popular for over a decade, they are relatively rare in the food and agriculture sector. COL has been pioneering outreach using MOOCs in agriculture (AgMOOCs) since 2015.

In 2023, COL offered three professional-level AgMOOCs, attracting over 16,000 registrations from more than 55 countries. Most learners were advanced students and teachers in agricultural and veterinary universities. The proportion of learners meeting the eligibility criteria for certificates ranged from 30 to 40 per cent, which is higher than the global average for similar-sized MOOCs.
People

BOARD OF GOVERNORS

HON DR HAJA RAMATULAI WURIE
Welcome to the Honourable Dr Haja Ramatulai Wurie, Minister of Technical and Higher Education, Sierra Leone, who is representing the Africa region.

HON PROF DR ALPHA T. WURIE
COL acknowledges outgoing board member, the Honourable Professor Alpha T. Wurie of Sierra Leone, who represented the Africa region.

COL STAFF

JYOTSNA JHA
Welcome to Dr Jyotsna Jha, Director: Skills, who has been engaged in open and distance learning and gender equality in support of skills development throughout her career.

FRANCES FERREIRA
Ms Frances Ferriera concluded her appointment as Acting Director: Skills and is serving COL as Senior Adviser: Women and Girls for a project on empowering women and girls, funded by Global Affairs Canada.

ANCA RISTEA
Welcome to Ms Anca Ristea, Accounting and Payroll Manager, who brings with her extensive experience in financial management.

RAY LEE
Farewell to former staff member Ray Lee, who had served as Accounting and Payroll Manager since 1995, providing long and valued service to COL.

FOCAL POINT (New)

ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA
Mrs Stacy Payne-Mascall
Ministry of Education, Sports and Creative Industries

More ODL for Sierra Leone

COL continues to build on its expertise in technology-based approaches to open and distance learning (ODL), with three initiatives recently launched in Sierra Leone. At the University of Sierra Leone (USL), the Eastern Technical University (ETU) and other universities in the country, COL supported ODL policy development workshops.

Approximately 40 stakeholders at ETU engaged in drafting and validating an ODL policy. Vice Chancellor and Principal, Professor Mohamed Lahai, acknowledged the role of the Tertiary Education Commission in ensuring ODL is mainstreamed throughout Sierra Leone and expressed appreciation for COL’s support.

During the workshop at USL, a baseline report and the university’s general policy landscape were shared, followed by presentations outlining ODL and the rationale for an ODL policy for higher education in Sierra Leone. An ODL policy outline was approved by stakeholders to guide the draft policy statements.

The Sierra Leone Teaching Service Commission organised a four-day stakeholder workshop on ODL design for teacher training. The high-level workshop drew participants from various teacher training institutes and national institutions. Based on its outcomes, tentative guidelines have been drafted for ODL in-service training courses that lead to certification, as well as courses proposed as credit-bearing for promotion and career advancement.

With support from COL, Sierra Leone’s Freetown Polytechnic (FP) conducted a workshop aimed at building academic and administrative capacity to establish ODL learner support services. From the workshop, FP developed an ODL learner’s manual on support services, covering key aspects such as academic, administrative, technical, emotional and peer-related support.
Can ChatGPT cause a paradigm shift in teaching?

COL hosted a webinar titled ‘ChatGPT: Implications for Teaching and Teacher Training’, featuring a panel of four eminent speakers who explored the potential and repercussions of this technology in developing country contexts.

A total of 380 participants from 47 countries attended the webinar, which attracted ministry officials, teachers, teacher educators, lecturers and education technology enthusiasts, among other professionals.

Besides a general introduction to ChatGPT, discussions included the impact of this technology on assessment, the training required to apply ChatGPT to specific subjects, and how it might be used for deep learning and teacher training within universities and schools.

Participants raised questions about ChatGPT’s potential to cause a paradigm shift in teaching, and the evolving role of teachers in collaborative and inclusive learning.

COL’s ChatGPT webinar represents a stride in the right direction, contributing to a broader understanding and appreciation of AI technologies for developing countries.

ODL and OER development in Zambia

COL is working with Zambia’s Higher Education Authority (HEA) to evaluate minimum standards and their quality assurance system. COL recently met with key partners in Zambia to facilitate a workshop for the HEA on open and distance learning (ODL) standards and guidelines, as well as open educational resources (OER). COL is also supporting ODL policy development and implementation, including capacity building on ODL and OER.

The first phase of the project commenced with a workshop in October 2023 for HEA staff and representatives from higher education institutions in Zambia, attended by the Minister of Education, the Honourable Mr Douglas Munsaka Syakalima, to share details about COL’s ongoing support for and interactions with national structures and different institutions in the country.

First COL activity in Togo

COL supported an ODL policy development workshop in Togo in October 2023. Fifty stakeholders from the ministries of higher education and technical education and the boards of universities in Togo attended the workshop for sensitisation on ODL and the drafting of an ODL policy for higher education.

Mr Marc Komi Aziadou-Ayissou, representing the Permanent Technical Secretary of the Education Sector Plan, thanked COL for this support and reminded stakeholders of the workshop’s objectives around ODL.

On 25 June 2022, Togo became the 56th member of the Commonwealth, following approval from Commonwealth leaders during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kigali, Rwanda.

ODL for teacher training, Rwanda

At a consultative meeting in Kigali, Rwanda, on Teacher Education and Training through ODL, Mr Leon Mugenzi, Head of Teacher Development, Management and Career Guidance and the Counselling Department at the Rwanda Basic Education Board (RBEB), hailed ODL as “a momentous step towards bolstering the quality of education.”

The consultation, organised in collaboration with COL, was attended by representatives from various Rwandan teacher training institutions, the University of Rwanda, schools, development partners and the RBEB. The findings of a COL-supported baseline study were unveiled, laying the foundation for an ambitious national ODL strategy.

As Rwanda unfolds its national ODL strategy, the education landscape stands poised for transformative change, with technology playing a crucial role in shaping the future of teaching and learning.
Making the most of (x)Reality in education

The technology is there, and education is eager to apply it. But how do we apply augmented/virtual/mixed reality in ways that will make a positive difference to learning?

Let’s start by defining just what it is we are dealing with here. Augmented, virtual and mixed reality are different. Augmented describes digital objects (including sound, graphics and video) overlayed in a real-world environment, visible via a digital device camera such as that of a mobile phone. Virtual is where the entire environment is digital, and elements can be interacted with, usually experienced through an immersive headset. Mixed is where augmented and virtual are combined, such that virtual objects in an augmented view can be engaged with and manipulated. A useful way of talking about all at once is to use the term xR – eXtended Reality.

Each of these technologies continues to surprise. Real-time text and audio translation are now technically possible through augmented reality, and virtual reality headsets are finding their way into classrooms. Medical operations, fire extinguisher training, sports techniques – even situations that may require officers to use tasers – are all current applications of VR in learning. Augmented reality can likewise be applied in fascinating ways for educational purposes. A quick online search will provide a variety of exciting, interesting and creative uses of xR.

It’s easy to get lost in the potential, which is entirely open-ended. But how can we harness the options in ways that add value, not just novelty, to education? Here is a series of steps that might be followed to evaluate the contribution. First, start with a learning opportunity. Is there a particular concept, learning requirement or teaching difficulty that learners simply find hard to grasp? Are there any misconceptions that learners continue to have, despite best efforts? Is there a complex task or skill that is difficult to simulate, or too expensive or risky to provide in real life? A yes to any of these indicates an xR solution may make sense.

Second, investigate the learning problem from an educational standpoint. What actual understandings, skills and experiences are required? What are some common misunderstandings, errors and perspectives that need to be corrected? These will give insight into the design that might apply.

Third, consider the return on investment. Does development (or purchase of an existing solution) make sense financially? In what ways might it make teaching and learning more efficient, as well as effective? What is the likely life cycle of the intervention, that is, how often might it need updating?

Fourth, confirm user access and experience. A few years ago, this step might have even come first. The combination of more accessible technology and increasingly ubiquitous access makes user access a later, yet still potentially halting, step. Not all xR requires expensive headsets, high bandwidth or top-of-the-line tablets. Consider the minimum technology that a solution may require and determine whether this might hinder xR as a viable solution. Alternatively, given the responses to the steps above, it might make sense to invest in some devices.

As with most technological possibilities available to us, xR promises much. Yet as open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL) practitioners, our focus must always be on the educational benefits a technology might bring, and so base its application on educational need. My position is that I believe the contribution xR can make will depend on specific learning requirements and a carefully considered set of educational outcomes.

I encountered an example of the potential for xR early in my career as a learning technologist. A colleague explained that drug calculations, an essential skill for nursing students to develop, was tedious to teach and frustrating for some learners. Mistakes were often made in decimal places; the difference between 1 litre and 0.1 litre is easy to see physically but can slip by on paper. The practice questions were too abstract. At the time of this conversation, xR was in its very early stages. Now, I can see an xR solution as entirely relevant for this situation.

Imagine a series of xR scenarios, based on real drugs and concentrations, providing endless opportunities for students to select a virtual syringe and draw the right dose to present their answer. Imagine, too, a virtual patient explaining the consequence of too little or – likely worse – too much being administered. Different patients, conditions, drugs and means of administering might all form part of the mix. The spatial and consequential concerns of drug calculations would become explicit.

Ultimately, the elegance of the educational solution, not the novelty or slickness of graphics, should drive our use of all educational technologies. xR has potential for use across all subject areas and practice disciplines, but whether it makes a positive difference in ODFL will depend on it being applied to the right learning opportunities.

1 I would like to acknowledge Kerry Deane, Digital Experience Manager at Te Pūkenga | Open Polytechnic, for his insight into the latest xR possibilities, that have informed this piece.

2 See, for example, ‘Metaverse school’ teaches students using VR - YouTube | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nwQ36m9aDE
New Resources

Research Study: Training for Blended TVET in Pan Commonwealth Countries

This study provides an overview of research into good practices in blended learning in technical and vocational education and training, along with the competencies teachers need for teaching in digital learning environments.

http://hdl.handle.net/11599/5432

Guide to QA of ODFL Provision in the Pacific

This guide is intended to support ministry of education officials and teachers in the Pacific to roll out high-quality distance education in their own contexts. While the expansion of ODFL has significantly increased participation in education, upholding the quality of provision cannot be overemphasised.

http://hdl.handle.net/11599/5443

Report on Technology-Enabled Learning Competency Framework for Teachers in Zambia

This report addresses the imperative of adapting to 21st-century education demands. Amidst the rise of technology-driven learning environments, this competency framework emerged as a response to evolving pedagogical landscapes. Aligned with Zambia’s context and an international model designed by UNESCO, the framework standardises competencies, offers guidance, fosters teacher professional growth and bridges digital disparities, ultimately enhancing education quality.

http://hdl.handle.net/11599/5458

Teacher Skills Required for Blended TVET: Analysis and Guidelines

This publication aims to establish the key issues and considerations in describing the new or modified digital and professional skills TVET teachers require for blended delivery. The accompanying Digital and Professional Teacher Competency Standards for Blended TVET (below) presents the draft competency standards.

http://hdl.handle.net/11599/5378

Digital and Professional Teacher Competency Standards for Blended TVET

This publication describes the new and emerging skill development needs related to blended delivery. The standards are contextualised to take into account the technology and capability challenges common in TVET institutes in developing countries, the range of teaching methods needed in TVET and the challenges of practising and assessing practical skills in blended environments.

http://hdl.handle.net/11599/5408

Course Material - Becoming a Climate Champion

Becoming a Climate Champion introduces key concepts of climate change and climate change action to safeguard the future, enabling students to better understand, participate and contribute. This course material has been produced by COL in collaboration with several of its open schooling partners.

http://hdl.handle.net/11599/5370
Harnessing AI in education with multimodality

The role of the teacher in harnessing AI in education and training is an emerging topic. This is particularly important with the wider use of generative AI services, of which ChatGPT is the prime example.

A number of universities have issued guidance notes on the use of generative AI (GenAI) services. The guidance provided by Waterloo University, in Canada, to a wide range of stakeholders is an exemplar. It covers essential topics, including the use of ChatGPT in teaching, the risks of cheating and the need to verify statements generated in a conversation.

Besides offering guidance, the University of Michigan (UM) has launched its own AI services; one of them offers GenAI models like ChatGPT for the university community, while another enables users to query their own datasets. The UM GPT Toolkit is a platform optimised for advanced users to construct, train and host AI models securely and at scale.

University-wide deployment of AI services can be quite expensive because it requires significant computing resources and costly personnel. However, Andrew Ng, an AI pioneer, offers a different view. He believes models that use 100 billion-plus parameters are not required to do most tasks. GPT 3.5, the model that runs the unpaid version of ChatGPT, has about 175 billion parameters. But much smaller models, with one to ten billion parameters, exist to do specific tasks and can run from a laptop computer. And there is a good possibility that more such models will be available sooner rather than later.

In fact, at the Commonwealth of Learning, we have installed and run the open-source Large Language Model called LLaMa in two different versions using a retired desktop computer. One version has 13 billion parameters, while the other provides 70 billion. A user can have meaningful conversations with either of the models. Thus, it is realistically feasible to make such a computer available in a department so that teachers and students can use it co-operatively and create good practices for applying GenAI in education.

A new frontier in artificial intelligence is emerging, called “multimodality.” This refers to AI systems that can process and generate content across multiple modes, including text, images, audio and video. Researchers are now developing AI models that can translate between modalities – for example, generating images from text descriptions or synthesising voices based on images.

GPT-Vision, an extension of the paid version of ChatGPT, possesses the capability to interpret visual data such as hand-drawn sketches. For instance, when provided with a hand-drawn sketch of a cylinder with marked dimensions, GPT-Vision can accurately decipher the dimensions and subsequently compute the volume of the cylinder by applying the formula for volume, showcasing a blend of visual understanding and computational proficiency.

Recently, the Bing Chat AI-powered assistant from Microsoft has been provided with the ability to generate good-quality images from text prompts. The implications are profound. Multimodal AI could enhance accessibility, allowing those with disabilities to better interact with content. It also raises concerns about misuse to create misinformation or inappropriate content.

University leaders will need an awareness of multimodality to set policies on AI ethics and to develop curricula. Expertise in multimodal machine learning may become crucial for computer science programmes. We must also consider how these technologies could improve or disrupt teaching and learning. With careful governance, AI’s new expressive powers could make education more creative and inclusive. However, we have to ensure users are guided by ethical principles.