

Four Decades of Open and Distance Learning: Future Directions



Keynote Presentation

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Distinguished Colleagues,

It is a pleasure to be here and I am very grateful to Prof Mukhopadhyay for the opportunity to speak to you. My topic today is ‘Four Decades of Open and Distance Learning: future directions’

In my presentation, I will first look at the context of Higher Education`, then trace the three generations of ‘open education’ and conclude with the implications that recent developments have on ODL institutions.

Let us first look at the context of Higher Education today

What are the key challenges that we face in Higher Education today? A recent report from the World Bank has identified several issues in the different regions of the world and I summarise five of these as

- Access and equity
- Financing and cost-efficiencies
- Governance
- Quality
- Recognition of qualifications & mobility. How can these be addressed?

Globally, age participation rates have grown from 19% in 2000 to 26% in 2007. In 2007, there were 150 million tertiary students globally, a 53% increase over 2000. In low income countries, there has been an increase from 5% in 2000 to 7% in 2007. In the last 4 years APRs in India have increased by 65%.

In spite of this huge expansion in Higher Education, the APRs in the developing world are far below those in the OECD countries. For example, in South Asia, the APRs remain at about 15% while in much of sub Saharan Africa, the figure falls below 10%.

Meanwhile, the gap between the demand and supply continues. In 2007, of the 80,000 applicants to the University of Dhaka, only 10,000 could be accommodated. The situation was similar for the public universities in Kenya. Last month the Indian Minister for human resource development announced that India would need an additional 800 universities if it was to absorb demand by 2020.

How can this demand be met? Let us look at the rise of open and distance learning as a solution to address the gaps of access, equity and quality. I will look at the three generations of ‘openness’

Forty years ago, the Open University, UK was launched to open up education to large numbers of people. That was when the term ‘open education’ became popular and the model captured the imagination of policy makers around the world. The success of the British Open University led to a huge expansion in open universities, particularly in the developing Commonwealth.

The founding chancellor of the Open University of the UK, Lord Crowther’s statement of openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas forms the basis of the first generation of open education. Open education is a philosophic construct that advocates the removal of constraints and barriers to learning— Open education refers to policies and practices that allow entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender, or time constraints.

These policies need not be part of a distance education system, which refers to the separation of the teacher and learner.

Open universities were oriented towards the massification of higher education. Many open universities do not insist on entry qualifications, allow learners to accumulate credits at their own pace and convenience and are flexible enough to allow learners to choose the courses they wish to study towards their qualification.

The principal technologies in this phase were print, radio and TV. Telephone and teleconferencing were being introduced as more emphasis was given to tutorial support. In many developing countries such as India, many open universities continue to follow this model.

The second generation of open education was shaped by the emergence and use of the internet and the world wide web. The first online course was launched in 1984 and the use of web-based programmes allowed learners the choice to study on campus or at a distance.

Interactivity was a key aspect of the second generation with a higher level of personalisation through the use of ICTs. This led to more flexible and blended approaches. Many campus based institutions began to offer both face to face and distance learning programmes, thereby opening up access to newer constituencies. In this phase we see a convergence of face to face and distance education provision.

Let us look at the growth of open universities which cover these two generations. In 1988, when COL began its operations, there were only 10 open universities in the Commonwealth—3 in Canada and only one in Africa, that is UNISA.

Twenty years later, that is in 2008, the number of open universities in the Commonwealth increased to 27. You can see that only one remained in Canada, the other two having merged with campus universities to

become dual-mode, marking the second generation. Mauritius is the most recent addition to the list of Commonwealth open universities.

Asia alone has 70 open universities that cater to the largest number of adult learners in the world.

The third generation of open education came at the turn of the century with the Open Education Resource movement which was based on the idea that knowledge was a public good and that technology could help share, use and reuse it. MIT's OpenCourseware initiative; Rice University's Connexions, the OpenLearn, of the Open University of the UK, among others initiated this movement.

More recently, many developing countries are investing in OER. Some of these initiatives are Sakshaat, the Indian Government's OER project, the China Open Resources for Education Initiative, Vietnam's Opencourseware and OER Africa.

What are OER? OER are educational materials that are free and freely available, suitable for all levels of education: primary secondary and tertiary, are reusable without having to seek the permission of the original author and available in multiple formats including print, though the reuse is easier in digital format. Let me share some examples which give an indication of how OER can increase access, improve quality and lower costs.

Course authoring can take up to 80% of an academic's time.

Collaboration can help academics save both course-authoring time and money

As you can see, the first generation takes us over 2 decades from 1969 to 1990 and we can see a gradual growth. The second generation, again started in 1984 and reached its high point in 2005. The third generation has taken off in the last ten years and can lead to major changes in the ways we teach and learn.

OER are beginning to capture the imagination of governments and policy makers around the world. In June this year, COL and UNESCO organized the 2012 World OER Congress in Paris to mark the tenth anniversary of the term OER.

The global community adopted the Paris OER Declaration, which makes 10 recommendations.

Let me just refer to four that may be of interest to you:

- Foster awareness and use of OER
- Foster strategic alliances for OER
- Encourage the development and adaptation of OER in a variety of languages and cultural contexts
- Encourage research on OER

This is an important development as governments tend to take such internationally-agreed documents led by UNESCO seriously and the Paris Declaration could have a major role in enlarging the circle to include policy makers.

Last month, the Commonwealth Education Ministers met in Mauritius for their triennial conference. Here again OER are reflected in the Communique. This is an influential document that is taken seriously by policy makers across the 54 Commonwealth Member States. Ministers recommend that '*a common platform for OER materials be set up for ease of access*' and '*the development and use of OER in providing quality teaching and learning for all*' be promoted.

What are the future directions and implications for ODL institutions?

Higher Education is opening up to newer and larger constituencies, especially women.

What implications do these developments have for the learner? The 'new learner' was an expression that became popular in the 1980s to refer to the adult learner who looked for new education, or skills for personal development, or enhanced job requirements.

More recently, Marc Prensky's phrase 'digital natives' has become popular to describe the technology savvy learners, as opposed to those of us who are digital immigrants to the technological landscape .

How can this learner become not just the consumer but also the producer of content? Can we already see a trend towards self-directed learning? What types of support will these learners require?

What do the learners want? Prensky interviewed 1000 American students and came to the conclusion that these learners did not want to be lectured to. They wanted to work with their peers, cooperate as well as compete with them and preferred education which was 'real' . (Prensky, 2010, p.16) Real means that students can see the connection between what they are learning and how they can use that learning to do something useful in the world.

Professor Bob Bernard of the Educational Technology group at Concordia University, Montreal, and his colleagues carried out a meta-analysis of hundreds of studies in which distance education students were treated in different ways. They distinguished three types of interaction: student – content; student – student; and student – teacher. They then analysed all the studies to find which type of interaction made the greatest difference to student performance when it was increased.

The results were very clear. Increasing *student – content* interaction had much the greatest effect; with *student – student* interaction coming next and *student – teacher* interaction last. This highlights the importance of content.

What implications does this have for pedagogy? In a recent paper Terry Anderson identifies the 3 generations of distance education pedagogy: the teacher student interaction in the first generation relied on behaviourist pedagogy; student-student interaction resulted in constructivist learning and the student-content relationship with the focus on networks and collaborative content development led to the term 'connectivism'. Will students learn more effectively with a mix of all three approaches?

What is the role of the teacher in the 21st century? The teacher seems to have evolved from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side to a partner in learning with the student of today. According to Prensky, the best strategy for the teacher would be to partner with the student. Both the teacher and the student can complement each other's strengths. While the teacher learns technology from the students, the student learns rigour, quality and context from her teacher.

What are the skills required for employability? A recent study interviewed employers in five cities in South Asia: New Delhi, Mumbai, Bhopal; Lahore in Pakistan and Dhaka in Bangladesh. Two clear themes emerged from the employer interviews in these three countries. The first is the importance of non-cognitive skills such as leadership, communication, honesty/ethics, teamwork and flexibility. The second is the importance of being able to learn and the need for critical thinking and analytical skills (Burnett, p. 9). This is a very important finding—our educational system has always laid a greater emphasis on cognitive skills. We can see that employers in the twenty first are increasingly stressing the need for non-cognitive skills.

In North America there is an interesting trend as more young women are earning higher salaries compared to young men. Why is this so? The nature of the economy has changed. Earlier it was a manufacturing economy producing goods and because strength mattered, men dominated the work force. Today we have a knowledge economy in which a different set of skills is required for success. According to Hanna Rosin, what is now needed is intelligence, the ability to sit still and focus, to listen carefully, communicate openly and work in teams. Women can do all these things very well and so they are earning higher salaries. (TED Talk). You will note that most of these skills are non-cognitive skills or what we sometimes call 21st century skills. The challenge before educational institutions today is how to integrate non-cognitive skills into the curriculum. This is possible through the growing availability of various technologies including low-cost mobile devices.

So what impact are OER having on universities? Let me first take the example of the OERU, a consortium of 18 universities which includes the University of Southern Queensland, Otago Polytechnic and Athabasca, among others. The proposal is to use OER to open up education to anyone anywhere in the world.

This would mean that each university places a percentage of its courses as OER, provides voluntary tutors and students pay only if they wish to be assessed. The total cost would be only 20-25 % of what they would normally pay

The Open University, UK has put its materials, like many other universities on iTunes university.

What do ODL institutions need to learn from these developments? ODL institutions must create cultures of quality, harness the potential of OER instead of developing fresh content and review the curriculum to integrate the skills required for success in the twenty first century.

ODL institutions have always focused on quality content. Now that high quality content is available as part of the global OER movement, the emphasis can shift to providing quality support services. This will be the key differentiator between the best and the rest

Powered by high bandwidth, high penetration and popularity of Internet, Higher Education institutions are experimenting with offering massive online open courses, open virtually to anyone in the world who aspires to access the course. The MOOCs attract large numbers of participants, sometimes several thousands, most of whom participate peripherally. MITx had 155,000 registrants for 1 MIT course) The MITx prototype course was completed finally by 7157 students which looks small by comparison, but as the edX president Anant Agarwal points out, “If you look at the number in absolute terms, its as many students as might take the course in 40 years at MIT”. This means that institutions will have to find out

their niche areas in which to offer such free courses. Open universities will need to develop frameworks for credit transfers and the recognition of qualifications so that when people come forward with credits from participating in MOOCs, institutions will be able to respond.

It will be possible for learners to construct their own courses based entirely on free and freely available resources. But who will provide the qualifications? Will we see the rise of new Degree Granting Bodies or Open Courseware Accreditation Agencies? How will the quality and credibility be ensured? Institutions are already grappling with these questions as they prepare to offer parallel pathways to making universal access to higher education a distinct possibility.

Open universities have always been known for their flexibility, openness, modular approach and curricular offerings linked to the labour market. Recent developments demonstrate all that open universities will need to strengthen their original mission and mandate.

Thank you for your kind attention.