Crisis in ODL: What is the Response?

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Transcript

I am delighted to be finally here at Symbiosis, an institution that I have heard much of, but never had the privilege of visiting thus far. I am grateful to the organisers Ms Swati Mazumdar and Dr SK Gandhe for giving me the opportunity to speak at the valedictory session to such a distinguished international audience.

I represent the Commonwealth of Learning and bring to you greetings from my President Sir John Daniel and all colleagues at Vancouver and New Delhi. Our motto, 'learning for development'.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States to harness the potential of distance education and technology to enhance access to learning which will contribute to development.

One of COL's priorities is providing equitable access to quality learning.The Symbiosis institutions too emerged from the idea of 'promoting international understanding through quality education', a motto that resonates well with us at COL. ODL is the obvious solution. So my topic today is 'Crisis in ODL: what is the response?'

I will first highlight some of the crises that are being encountered by Open and Distance Learning around the world. I will then give an overview of how some institutions have responded to these challenges over the last forty years. I will then suggest three things that can be done to establish the credibility of ODL and finally conclude with how international organisations such as the Commonwealth of Learning have responded to the situation.

But first the crises.

If we go back to the year when COL first started its operations 1988, there were only 10 open universities in the Commonwealth, with three in Canada alone.

Twenty years later, there were 27, with only one remaining in Canada, the other two having merged with conventional institutions. This shows the huge expansion in dedicated ODL institutions, linked to the phenomenon of the massification of higher education, especially in the developing Commonwealth. It

also highlights the increasing convergence of conventional and face to face learning that has happened due to elearning in the developed world. 86% of all US degree granting institutions offer elearning in addition to classroom teaching.

Asia has the largest number of adult ODL learners in the world, over 70 open universities, 13 of which are mega-universities! India alone has a growing network of 14 open universities, 14 open schools and nearly 150 dual-mode institutions which collectively cater to over 7 million learners.

In spite of this massive expansion, ODL seems to be in crisis. On the one hand, governments are establishing ODL institutions to enhance access to tertiary education, on the other they create barriers which continue to relegate distance education to secondary status. Take the case of China.

A recent legislation from Equador illustrates the constant struggle for recognition and 'parity of esteem' that ODL institutions continue to face. Many of us here will find the call for no government employment for ODL graduates quite familiar. This is surely a paradox, since most of the institutions have been established by the governments in the respective countries.

The Ethiopian government also announced a ban on all distance education institutions in the country saying that 'distance learning education is unnecessary at this stage in the development of the education sector'

However, a happy solution was found when the ban was lifted two months later, with the introduction of a QA system.

Bangladesh Open University (BOU) does not have the regulatory and legal support required to ensure that its degrees are equivalent to those of the campus universities in the country. The Ministry of Education does not recognise any of its qualifications except the secondary school certificate[1].

HE President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria in a televised address in late 2010 said that if he had his way, he would close down the National Teachers Institute, the only dedicated distance teacher training institution in the entire Commonwealth.

Paradoxically, his predecessor HE Olusegun Obasanjo, firmly believed in the merits of ODL, resurrected the closed open university of Nigeria and if that was not enough, joined as a student of theology. As the governments seek to promote ODL, establish institutions and finance them, they are also responsible for ensuring the credibility of the system. It is governments who frame policies, establish instruments to monitor the performance of the institutions they create and must assure stakeholders that their investments of time, money and effort in pursuing the programmes are worthwhile.

Research findings show that there is 'no significant difference' between distance and traditional classroom instruction in terms of learning outcomes; yet there is a lingering perception, especially in the developing world, that distance education is not just as effective or adequate as formal education. How do we address this gap in understanding and perception? Here is a strange paradox. Even as distance education continues to grow, we see an opposition that seeks to raise barriers in various forms.

However, ODL institutions cannot escape the responsibility for the persistence of the perceptions of poor quality. There are providers who have given a bad name to ODL and this image problem has tended to

paint all ODL institutions with the same black brush, in spite of substantive independent evidence of quality in many among them. It is therefore in the interests of all providers to ensure that the quality assurance arrangements for ODL are sufficiently robust and rigorous to address the prejudice and cynicism that have developed.

Let us look at how some institutions in the Commonwealth have responded to these challenges in the last four decades?

The Open University Malaysia, has developed a Quality Management System (QMS) to assure the quality of its course materials. Four departments of the university have an ISO 9001: 2000 certification from the Standard and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia. It is also accredited by the Malaysia National Accreditation Board responsible for accrediting both conventional and ODL institutions.

The model in this case reflects an attempt at constantly trying to improve its processes through internal and external quality assurance measures, the latter pertaining to national as well as international standards.

For instance, Universitas Terbuka and the Open University Malaysia have gained ISO Certification; the former has also received international accreditation from the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE)[2].

Institutions such as The Open University in the UK and IGNOU comply with standards set by the national bodies namely the QA Agency in the UK and the Distance Education Council of India respectively.

The perceptions about the effectiveness of distance education in the developed countries are quite different from those in the developing world. For instance, the UK Open University (UKOU) ranked fifth among the 100 universities surveyed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)[3].

Some institutions have developed their own QA policies such as the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). The Open University of Sri Lanka was assessed successfully by the University Grants Commission based on the same criteria as in the case of the 14 conventional universities in the country. However, the Senate and the Council of OUSL believed that this did not take into consideration the specific features that characterise ODL. To fill this gap, OUSL developed a QA framework for ODL in 2005 in partnership with UGC and COL.

Here is an example of an open university taking the lead in developing standards and quality measures that would be applicable at the national level and cover the over 25 providers of distance education in the country.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has adopted best practices from different ODL institutions across the world. In large countries such as India and Nigeria, with students scattered over vast geographical distances, timely dispatch and receipt of materials can be a major challenge. NOUN has tried to address this problem by distributing materials at the Study Centres and putting over 500 course materials on the NOUN website so that students may access them without delays. There is an emphasis

on the use of ICTs especially in relation to e-Examinations so that the turnaround time between exams taken and the announcement of results is greatly reduced.

NOUN has taken some of the lessons from the successful practices of other open universities and integrated them into its own QA processes.

What can be done?

In the models of quality assurance that we have examined earlier, we noted that in the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) assesses both campus as well as the open universities. Open universities and dual mode providers have the same purpose that all universities serve. And if all institutions are judged according to the same benchmarks, there is less likelihood of ODL being considered second rate. The Open University, UK is assessed like any other university in the UK by the QAA. It is true that many open universities have a social mission and a more flexible delivery mode. But if the judgements are based on fitness for purpose, quality of courses, effective learner support, and student achievement, there is no need for separate QA regulations only for ODL provision.

Most ODL QA systems have focused mainly on input and process measures. A survey of nine mega universities by Jung (2005), lists the key QA areas identified by these institutions. Most of them share three common themes: content, learner support, and learner assessment. Only one mentioned 'outcome of courses and programmes'. Most of the areas identified relate to inputs and processes rather than to results and outcomes. If ODL institutions are to be credible institutions of high quality, they need to provide evidence of their results. The emphasis needs to shift from inputs to outcomes.

The unmistakable conclusion that follows from this discussion is that our efforts to establish the credibility of ODL must continue. But we also need to appreciate the fact that the higher education system has a history of a thousand years while ODL, is a relative fledgling. The going will be tough, but the ODL providers are on the right track and will get closer to their goal of reaching the unreached and gaining better recognition by guaranteeing the quality of their provision and the effectiveness of their outcomes.

The COL approach has been two-fold: to influence policy at national and institutional levels and to build the capacity of institutions and individuals to offer better quality ODL.

COL brought out an interesting publication on how resource-poor institutions can still maintain a culture of quality through various strategies. This may well be worth a read.

Today, there is no dearth of free models and guidelines for distance education and elearning that can be adopted or adapted. COL has developed several QA Toolkits instruments and publications, as well as a QA micro-site are free resources available to all.

There is little evidence of any real mutual recognition of qualifications within and across regions. International and regional bodies have an important role to play as it is often not possible for developing countries to muster the human and financial resources to develop such protocols on their own. However, there are resources to help these countries in this work. For example, COL has developed a *Transnational Qualifications Framework* for use by the 32 small states of the Commonwealth, which is now a free resource for adoption and adaptation by any country.

In this present decade the emphasis has shifted to the integration of both external and internal QA measures so that institutions develop 'cultures of quality'. A more recent shift is the focus on self-improvement rather than accountability.

Reflecting these developments, COL has developed a COL Review and Improvement Model (COLRIM), which helps both ODL and conventional institutions assess their respective practices as a step towards external accreditation or as an ongoing process of continuous self-improvement. This becomes particularly helpful in resource-poor contexts, which do not have the luxury of national QA Agencies or the resources necessary to opt for regional or international accreditation. It is a simple five-step process which can be undertaken by any institution.

It combines internal and external quality assurance in a low-cost 'do-it-yourself' approach which does not require a panel of external experts but involves internal staff. It involves:

• Developing systemic thinking and organisational learning

• Offering credibility without high-stake consequences for poor performance

• Focuses on capacity building

It is meant for both ODL and conventional institutions and if any of you chooses to undertake this exercise, COL will be ready to help.

Thank you

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[1] Latchem & Jung, 2010. p160

[2] Latchem & Jung, 2010. p. 163

[3] J Daniel, A Kanwar, Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic, (2005), 'Mega-university=mega quality?' Keynote by Sir John Daniel at 2nd World Summit of Mega-Universities, 25 September, 2005, at http:/www.col.org/col web/ site/pid/3588