

# MOOCs for Development: the COL Experience



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Presented at the official launch of the publication "Making Sense of MOOCs: A Guide for Policy Makers in Developing Countries", organized by UNESCO's Education Sector and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL).

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It's a pleasure to be here at UNESCO and I thank ADG Tang, David Atchoarena and Mariana Patru for the invitation. UNESCO and COL share a long history of collaboration when both organisations signed an MOU in 1994. This continues to be a very productive partnership that has resulted in several important outcomes.

Today we are here to launch the joint publication 'Making Sense of MOOCs' and I must acknowledge the valuable contributions of both Mariana and Balaji for making this possible.

As you know, the Commonwealth of Learning or COL is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government. Our headquarters are in Metro Vancouver and we have a regional office, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, in New Delhi.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to harness the potential of distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training. COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development.

But first the context.

We work in the Commonwealth which has 53 member states that span all regions of the globe—from the Caribbean to the Pacific--46 are developing countries with several challenges relating to education and training.

Globally, there are 1.2 billion young people between the ages of 15-24, and most of them are in developing countries. The Commonwealth is young with 60% of its population of 2.3 billion, below the age of 29.

However, there is a high rate of unemployment especially among the youth. 12% of the young people in the Commonwealth are unemployed, as compared to the global average of 14%.

In which ways can technology help? While there are 80 internet users per hundred in the developed world, the figure in the developing countries drops to 35%, with internet use in Africa being lower still at 21%.

The Commonwealth average for internet use is not much higher at 24%. The real growth in the last decade has taken place in mobile use, which stands at 80%.

Such disparities in technology between the developed and developing world, are also reflected in access to education. The GER ratio for secondary education in the developing world is about 71%, while for tertiary education it is 27%, well below the developed world average of 74%.

How then will we achieve the global aspiration of SDG Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030?

Governments are looking for ways in which young people can be skilled for employment and entrepreneurship. In fact the Indian Prime Minister Mr Modi has called for skills to be developed at speed and at scale.

One of the recommendations in the Framework for Action for achieving Goal 4 by 2030 is to ‘Develop policies and programmes for the provision of quality distance learning in tertiary education, with appropriate financing and use of technology, including the Internet, massive open online courses and other modalities that meet accepted quality standards to improve access’.

Over the past five years, we have seen the phenomenal growth of Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs, a form of distance and online learning. In 2015, more people signed up for MOOCs than in the previous three years combined. The MOOC has one distinction: it is the only scalable educational technology that was developed by and for educators. Nearly all other educational technologies such as radio and TV were adaptations of technology developments for other sectors.

MOOCs are an important solution to three key challenges in the current education system: one that it is rigid, two, it highly expensive and three, it takes a lot of time to complete. MOOCs have demonstrated that the world can be a connected classroom.

COL developed a policy brief on MOOCs for the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers held in the Bahamas last June.

The brief demonstrates how MOOCs have the potential to provide access to quality learning opportunities at low costs. MOOCs can be harnessed to provide new opportunities for capacity building at scale and to foster innovative uses of technologies, such as mobile devices. Through the use of alternative pedagogical approaches, learning outcomes can be improved. However, MOOCs would need to be integrated within national quality assurance frameworks to enable the recognition and accreditation of qualifications. Let me share examples of what COL has done along these dimensions.

COL has carved out a niche for itself in MOOCs for Development (MOOC4D) and has a network of institutional partners and practical researchers keen to harness MOOCs in support of mass outreach. There is a full chapter dedicated to this aspect in the book.

Working with partners in the University of South Pacific, IIT Kanpur and UNESCO, COL offered a MOOC on Climate Change. 70% of the participants were from the Pacific region. What contributed to the success of this MOOC was the cross-cultural exchanges and the use of social media.

In partnership with the African Virtual University, COL offered a MOOC to train teachers in integrating ICTs for teaching and learning. While most MOOCs today are closed, all the content of COL MOOCs is available as OER and anyone can use or reuse it.

COL has been providing technical advice to partners in developing countries on how to offer MOOCs on Mobiles for Development. Our MOOC on Mobiles for Development reached participants in 116 countries. A new blended model began to emerge. In Sierra Leone participants were given content on

DVD and they used their limited bandwidth to interact with tutors and to do their assignments. Participants in Zambia formed a group to study video materials and go online using the one available computer.

While there are about 4700 MOOCs that have been offered in various disciplines, less than 20 relate to agriculture. Within the MOOC4D paradigm, COL has catalyzed a consortium to offer agMOOCs—which are all related to food and agriculture.

COL's MOOC for Malis or gardeners was offered through basic mobile phones jointly with the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. Here are some participants who learned about new techniques in horticulture and discovered that some of the pesticides that they had been using were banned.

As you have seen, MOOCs4D has developed a different approach as compared to mainstream MOOCs. Content can be delivered in low bandwidth situations including on basic mobile phones. Social media integration is valuable because it encourages participation and peer to peer interactions. Any MOOC4D must lead to more sharing and development of OER.

One of the emerging issues in MOOCs is that of quality. This is a key topic in the book.

COL has developed draft Guidelines for Quality in MOOCs. These are meant for governments, MOOC providers, for learners and for Quality Assurance Agencies. The purpose of the MOOC determines the quality indicators, the context is critical and institutions are now moving towards assigning credits and recognition.

These Guidelines will be released in July and cover three dimensions which will be helpful for quality assurance and accreditation agencies.

The Malaysian Qualifications Agency has developed a credit transfer mechanism under which students in conventional universities can earn credit by doing courses from Malaysia MOOC and these will be counted towards their formal qualification.

But since MOOCs are offered globally and to a diversity of learners, the question is can one size fit all? What of student verification and academic integrity? Is a peer reviewed assessment acceptable? Is there a delinking of the institutions which teach and the institutions which credential? What will be the role of accreditation? These are some of the questions covered in this book.

What then are the implications for policy makers?

According to a recent MIT publication, MOOCs are considered a catalyst for reforms in higher education and the report makes four recommendations of which let me refer to two. One is to promote interdisciplinary collaboration; another is to recognize that learning can be reengineered according to the requirements of different online technologies.

A National Policy for MOOCs can provide an enabling environment for institutions wishing to offer MOOCs. A framework for QA and credentialing in this new medium needs to be evolved. MOOCs for skills development are as important as MOOCs in Higher Education. The policy needs to address the importance of a robust IT infrastructure for institutions as they by themselves cannot create or own one. The use of OER or free content can reduce the cost of building a MOOC.

To conclude, contrary to what Thomas Freidman says, MOOCs are not a revolution but an evolution of existing principles and practice. At present, MOOCs are being used for continuous professional development and training in the developing world. The MOOC technologies provide us with the opportunity to transform our pedagogic practice and finally, MOOCs will complement and supplement

rather than replace existing higher education institutions. The real advantages of MOOC for development would be in skilling at scale and with speed.

This book is one of the many milestones in COL's collaboration with UNESCO. As governments review and renew their national education policies to integrate the targets of SDG 4, MOOCs can be a valuable tool and technology for helping us to accelerate progress towards achieving lifelong learning for all by 2030.

Thank you for your kind attention.