COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

PCF8
PAN-COMMONWEALTH FORUM

COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING

OUM
OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

OPEN, ONLINE AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING :

THE KEY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary of the PCF8
Online Discussion Forums

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Introduction

In order to kick-start momentum for the eighth Pan-Commonwealth Forum (PCF8), the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and Open University Malaysia (OUM) organised four online discussion forums around PCF8's sub-themes. We used an open-source platform called Discourse[1] to organise the online discussion space[2], and used direct emails, mailing lists and social media to announce each online discussion forum. The main conference website[3] and the COL website[4] also provided links to the discussion forum website.

The online forums were scheduled between April and September 2016 and each ran for four weeks, as follows:

- Effectiveness and efficiency: 1 – 30 April 2016
- Access and inclusiveness: 15 May – 15 June 2016
- Quality and equity in learning: 1 – 30 July 2016
- Technology and innovation: 15 August – 15 September 2016

We received 625 requests to participate in the online forums, with 470 actually joining. Table 1 provides an overview of participation.

Table 1: Participation in online discussion forums

Forums	Users joined	Number of topics	Number of replies	Number of views
Efficiency and effectiveness	216	14	493	2731
Access and inclusion	238	11	189	955
Quality and equity in learning	301	5	197	922
Technology and innovation	362	15	351	2925
Total		45	1230	7533

We see that engagement was high in the first forum in comparison to the others. As the discussion progressed, the number of people participating in each forum increased and the last forum saw maximum participation and views. In general participants were viewing/reading the discussions, but posted their views less on the platform. Overall, we reached 470 people from 66 countries (including 17 non-Commonwealth countries) through the four online forums.

Figure 1 and 2 show the daily visits and posts to the site. While the highest daily visit was almost 70 persons, on average about 15 people visited the site each day over the period of the discussion. Initially there were more than 80 posts, but they subsided considerably and the average number of posts per day was below 10.

We present here a brief summary of the online discussions.

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[1] http://www.discourse.org/
[2] http://pcf8forum.col.org/
[3] http://pcf8.oum.edu.my/page/home/index.php
[4] http://www.col.org

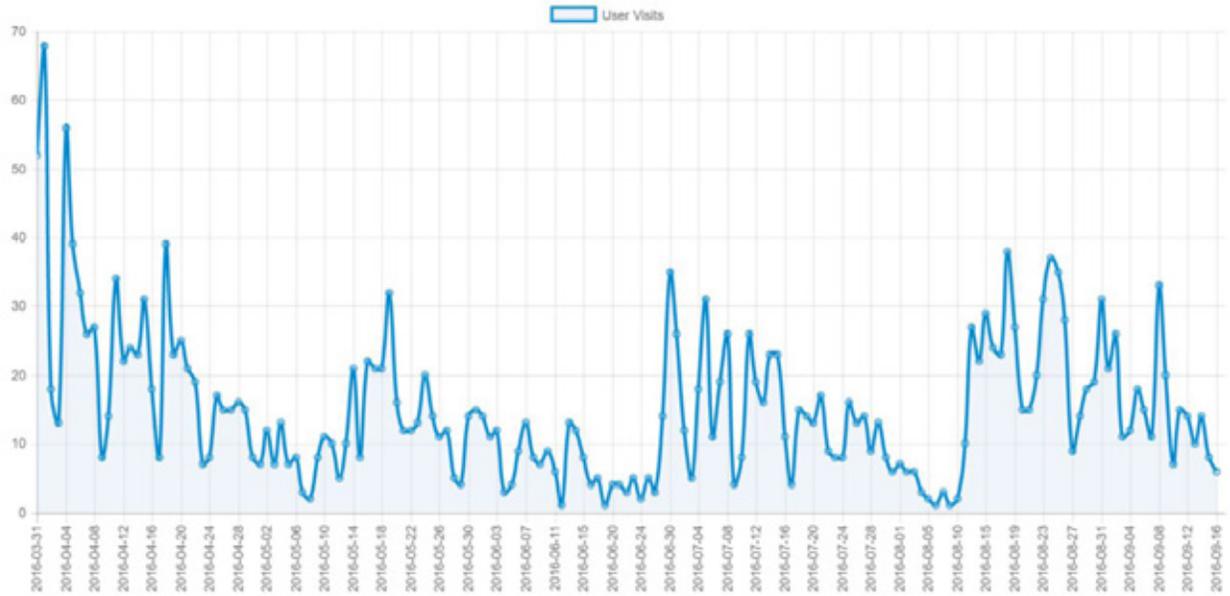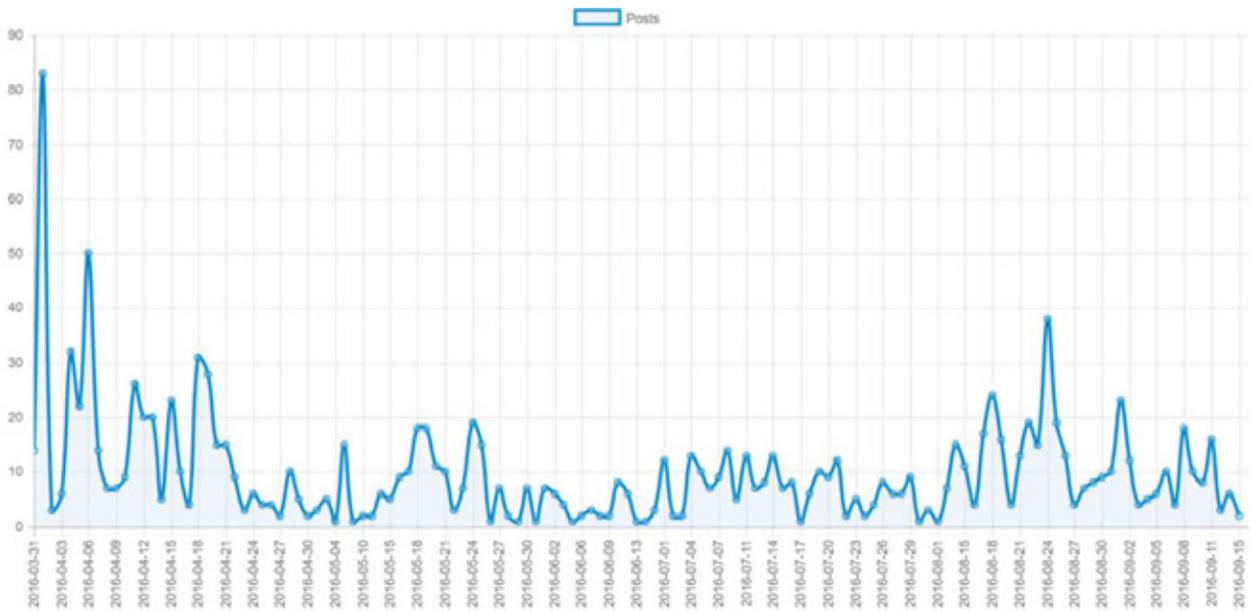Figure 1: Visits to discussion site

Figure 2: Posts to discussion site

OVERVIEW

The *Effectiveness and efficiency* online forum focused on discussing research into efficiency and effectiveness in open and distance learning (ODL) and offered participants the opportunity to:

- reflect and share research on efficiency and effectiveness in ODL;
- identify existing research gaps; and
- identify strategies for the improvement of research on efficiency and effectiveness in ODL.

PROCESS

This online forum attracted 216 participants with 2731 views and was built around the following weekly topics:

- defining open and distance learning (ODL);
- research gaps in efficiency and effectiveness in ODL;
- models for monitoring and evaluation; and
- wrap-up and agreement on recommendations.

Each week began with the facilitator posing questions for discussion and participants sharing resources, experiences and comments.

MAIN ISSUES

Defining ODL

In a bid to frame the scope of the discussions, participants repeatedly discussed various definitions of ODL with many forum members frequently returning to their personal understanding and perspective of ODL to frame efficiency and effectiveness.

Technology

In debating strategies for the achievement of effectiveness and efficiency in ODL programmes, the forum participants also discussed technology, particularly its use in ensuring flexible, ubiquitous and equitable learning experiences. The central role of the Internet and mobile devices was emphasized, however, participants expressed concerns that there seems to be a greater focus on technology rather than the needs of the learners. It was further expressed that the technology gap is one of the reasons that ODL is not always efficient and effective.

Quality

The participants revealed that the perception of ODL as lesser quality than traditional education continues to dog ODL. They expressed a need for ODL practitioners and institutions to ensure learning environments meet diverse learning needs, meet quality standards of service provision, and carefully and appropriately use technologies to mediate learning and manage programmes.

Cost

The common belief from participants is that ODL is less expensive than traditional face-to-face education. Funding for education on a global scale is perceived to be shrinking, which makes ODL an opportunity for regions to coordinate their efforts. Participants, however, raised concerns that costs are sometimes shifted to the learners. They agreed that cost effectiveness will come from coordinating efforts and large-scale delivery, and that the use of Creative Commons licensing is a desired way forward in sharing and curating content.

The other issues discussed included learner profiles, the scope of ODL and accreditation.

BEST PRACTICES

While no deliberate attempts were made to gather best practices from the participants, a number shared their experiences of what had worked for them. For example:

- While discussing the importance of forums for sharing research experiences, one participant pointed

to the Global Open Educational Resources Graduate Network (GO-GN) as an example of good practice. GO-GN is a global network of PhD students researching openness in education, along with their supervisors, mentors and other interested stakeholders.
- While discussing monitoring and evaluation, the ADDIE (Analyse, Design, Develop, Implement and Evaluate) model was highlighted due to its inclusion of evaluation in designing and developing training programmes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This forum discussion focused mainly on research in efficiency and effectiveness in ODL. It was noted that there is very little research taking place and most of it is largely regional or country specific, and that there are capacity challenges that seem to be inhibiting research. The following recommendations were made:

1. promote more global research in the areas of access and equity of technology, quality of experience, cost of ODL, learner profiles, scope and accreditation, Creative Commons and OER;
2. determine parameters and data collection methods with which to measure efficiency and effectiveness;
3. create built-in mechanisms for tracking a variety of concepts and increase use of data to improve systems and practices;
4. create vibrant research platforms for the sharing of results and best practices;
5. Coordinate efforts to build the research capacity of ODL institutions and researchers;
6. increase funding for research in ODL; and
7. ensure appropriate national and international policies, systems and structures to support research in ODL.

CONNECTION TO THE MAIN THEME OF PCF8

The conference will be addressing a number of questions on how effectively and efficiently ODL is increasing access to quality education and reaching the unreached, as well as the strategies being used to reduce drop-out rates and increase retention, pass rates and completion rates. Further discussions will examine questions around the most cost-efficient and cost-effective models of ODL, and how technology can be harnessed to achieve higher levels of efficiency and effectiveness in ODL. Research is vital in answering these questions. The recommendations made in this online forum provide direction to areas conference stakeholders could pursue to ensure the potential of ODL is fully exploited.

Access and inclusiveness (15 May – 15 June 2016)

OVERVIEW

The *Access and inclusion* online forum focused on:
- improving access to educational opportunities and promoting inclusiveness, at all levels;
- ways of improving access for example eLearning, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), public-private partnership, etc.; examples of using open, distance and blended learning for development;
- new models of increasing access and providing equitable educational opportunities;
- analysis of the effect of equity/inequity on development; and
- examples of policies for improving equity.

A total of 11 main discussion threads were posted: five main questions, three summaries, a resources thread and an initial welcome thread.

PROCESS FOR DISCUSSIONS

This online forum was very active and the discussions were rich and detailed. Participants were asked to support their responses to the five main questions with examples from their own setting and location. While many examples focused on higher education, other forms of tertiary education were also covered, as was work-based learning, school education and informal learning.

The range of locations mentioned was diverse, including India, Kenya, Ghana, the UK, Antigua and Barbuda, Vanuatu, Malaysia, South Africa, Namibia, Fiji, Canada, Bangladesh, Tanzania and Botswana. This allowed for comparisons between cultures, educational systems, teaching and learning approaches and political contexts. Indeed, the geographical differences between the examples stood out as significant, for example, the difference between urban and rural, the particular challenges experienced by small island states, and the contrast between the developed and the developing world.

MAIN ISSUES

Definition of 'access' and 'inclusion'

Access was defined as having a rights-based component, whereby individuals have a right to a quality education, and governments and institutions should take measures to help ensure these rights be realised and that barriers to equality of educational opportunity are removed. These barriers may include gender, age, economic circumstances, disability, culture, geographical location, language, family circumstances and educational experience.

Inclusion was also identified as being rights-based, and focused on achieving equality of educational opportunity. Rather than applying to what goes on before an individual begins their studies, inclusion is connected with what happens during the learning process and is very closely focused on individual learners' needs.

Popularity of open and distance learning and its potential to achieve educational and social inclusion

Participants were unanimous that open and distance learning has considerable potential to achieve educational inclusion. Indeed, one participant proclaimed: 'I am touched...by the question of whether the developing world will at one time catch up with the rest. This to me is the biggest dream mankind can ever have.' However, participants also pointed out that realizing the potential of ODL is not without problems. One participant commented:

> The academic community supports ODL initiatives, but doesn't value its products! I have seen that academic institutes/organisations still have an unspoken bias towards conventional learning. The human resource created by ODL is often not seen to have a status at par with face-to-face learners.

Another participant warned against seeing the developing world as a homogeneous concept, explaining that 'great differences exist within the developing world...These can exist at regional levels (urban/rural, speakers of a major language vs speakers of an endangered minority language), but also from one household to the next.'

The need for OER champions to drive awareness and use in specific countries was also mentioned.

Research gaps related to access and inclusion

Participants were asked: Which aspects of access and inclusion in relation to open and distance learning (including MOOCs and OER) are currently under-researched (and worth researching)? How might we address these research gaps? The aim of asking this question was to create a research agenda for presentation at the PCF8 conference. More broadly, the need to disseminate research findings to policy makers was stressed and participants discussed how this might happen. An example was given from Antigua of lobbying education officers for the use of ODL and OER.

Research access and inclusion in informal learning

This question appeared to attract responses from participants who had been involved in research, monitoring and evaluation of ODL. They discussed research methods for evaluating formal ODL programmes and also covered the evaluation of other forms as open education, such as open educational resources.

BEST PRACTICES

The creation of locally relevant content through communities of practice was highlighted, with an example from Antigua & Barbuda being given, and the broader examples of the Virtual University for Small States of the

Commonwealth (VUSSC) and the UK Open University's partnerships with professional bodies, employers, trade unions and charities, were cited as best practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants generally agreed that widening access and achieving educational inclusion requires governments, institutions and teachers to accommodate diverse learner needs and make learning relevant to all.

Participants agreed that there is a need for action on a system-wide scale, by governments (e.g. passing new laws) and on a local/individual scale, by teachers and institutions (e.g. changing teaching approaches). Both were deemed equally important. The challenges of large-scale, open-learning initiatives were of particular interest to participants, who mentioned the need for capacity-building measures to be in place before opening enrolment on a very large scale and the difficulties faced by ODL teachers in trying to accommodate their learners' very disparate needs and abilities, especially in the case of large-scale, open-enrolment initiatives.

It was suggested that while many of these structural and societal barriers could only really be removed through government policy and initiatives, the open education movement could help:
- Ensure OER are accessible in mother tongue languages, in accessible formats (not necessarily online) and with culturally relevant content.
- Nurture communities of practice, whereby local people work together to adapt OER and to provide peer support for skills development.
- Raise awareness of OER, MOOCs and ODL.

Participants stressed the need to narrow the technological and digital gap between digital 'haves' and 'have-nots' before the potential of ODL could be realised in terms of achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs). It was suggested that this could be achieved through advocacy for policy mandates and infrastructure development (e.g. information and communication technology (ICT) and Internet connectivity).

CONNECTION TO THE MAIN THEME OF THE PCF8

Participants believed that ODL, OER and MOOCs have great potential to help achieve the SDGs, through education, information-sharing and empowerment. SDG4 and SDG 5 were particular foci of attention. However, participants also repeatedly mentioned the tension between the potential of ODL and the difficulties posed by structural and technical barriers that make access to ODL impossible in some contexts, especially where provision is delivered solely online.

Quality and equity in learning (1 – 30 July 2016)

OVERVIEW

Provision of quality and equitable education was conceptualised as a key ingredient of socio-economic development and therefore should be accorded priority by policy makers. The discussion helped participants:
- gain better conceptual clarity of the two concepts as they apply to educational provisioning and to the ODL mode;
- share experiences on how quality and equity are promoted, and possible areas for establishing a criteria for quality and equity in ODL;
- suggest strategies for enhancing quality and equity in educational provisioning, particularly in resource-constrained contexts;
- examine the contribution of quality and equity to sustainable livelihoods; and
- share best practices.

The online facilitator played a key role as a catalyst and moderator. The discussions were asynchronous, thus allowing participants to post in the forum as and when it was convenient for them to do so. They posted questions, strategies and practices in their countries, as well as responses to questions posed by the online facilitator and by their peers. With guidance from the facilitator, participants teased out issues relating to the theme and generated useful insights that have the potential to inform both policy and practice. Participants were encouraged to reflect on experiences in their contexts and share both the successes and challenges faced in promoting quality and equity in learning in their respective countries.

MAIN ISSUES

Understanding quality and equity

Quality was defined as fitness for purpose and there was a general consensus that quality assumes a contextual character, and that it is relative. The discussion interrogated both the subjective and objective notions of quality. The clear message was that it is important to make quality more visible and measurable, and therefore, we need to define quality criteria in all the service areas of an education institution. But defining such quality criteria is not enough, we need to ensure that the criteria are effectively implemented. Regarding equity, there was consensus that it is about providing opportunities to acquire quality education to everyone. Thus, the discussion established that equity is about fairness.

Criteria for quality and equity in ODL

Participants made it clear that every institution should have its own quality promise to learners and other stakeholders, such as parents, and should set quality standards for all the services offered, for example:

- programme and course design
- learning materials
- student support
- staffing
- infrastructure
- learner assessment

Further it was argued that quality criteria for distance education should be the same as that for face-to-face provision in order to establish a sense of parity between the two modes of provision. Such a measure would address the challenge that is faced in many contexts.

Strategies for promoting equitable access and quality learning opportunities

The following are some of the strategies that were suggested by participants:

- creating affirmative policies that ensure gender and socioeconomic equity;
- providing funding for disadvantaged learners;
- enriching learning by making use of OER;
- admitting students in tertiary institutions or in certain disciplines using a quota system;
- providing qualified teachers in schools located in rural areas and in other disadvantaged communities;
- providing facilities that make learning feasible for physically challenged learners;
- reducing the opportunity costs of going to school for learners from poor family backgrounds;
- providing hostel facilities for learners who have to walk long distances daily to get to school; and
- providing food at school for learners from poor homes.

Contribution of quality and equity to sustainable livelihoods

A shared understanding of sustainable livelihood was as defined by Serrat (2008):

> A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base (p.1).

Participants argued that the discourse on sustainable livelihoods places the poor and vulnerable at the forefront. Policies, strategies and ways that can be used in order to make such people manage their current and future lives at a reasonable standard of living are key to achieving the goal of sustainable livelihoods. The importance of leveraging quality and equity learning using technology was emphasised and COL's Aptus technology was given as a good example. It was appreciated that the essence of the pedagogy behind the Aptus is that the teacher has a controlled educational "online" Wi-Fi space to support and enhance classroom practice.

BEST PRACTICES

The best practices implemented in some of the countries that were highlighted included the following:

- providing funding for disadvantaged learners;
- enriching learning by making use of OER;
- admitting students using a quota system;
- providing qualified teachers in disadvantaged communities;
- providing facilities that make learning feasible for physically challenged learners;
- reducing the opportunity costs of going to school for learners from poor family backgrounds;
- providing hostel facilities for learners who have to walk long distances daily to get school; and
- providing food at school for learners from poor homes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Formulate policies that ensure gender and socio-economic equity;
2. Establish funding for disadvantaged learners;
3. Encourage use of OER to improve access and enrich learning; and
4. Use minority languages in teaching and learning for learners from marginalised communities.

CONNECTION TO THE MAIN THEME OF THE PCF8

The issues of quality and equity are critical for achieving all the 17 SDGs and is especially crucial for SDG 4. The connection with the main theme of "Open, Online and Flexible Learning: The Key to Sustainable Development" was enhanced by:

- sharing how quality and equity are promoted through ODL;
- suggesting strategies for enhancing quality and equity in educational provisioning;
- discussing the contribution of quality and equity to sustainable livelihoods; and
- sharing best practices in implementing quality and equitable education in participants' respective countries.

Technology and Innovation (August 15 – September 15 2016)

OVERVIEW

This sub-theme focused on the use of appropriate technology and innovations in teaching and learning, including new developments such as flipped classrooms, learning analytics, mobile learning and massive open and online course (MOOC). It also looked at the research and development of new applications for improving open, online and flexible leaning environments, and examples of successes and pitfalls in the use of technology for learning, i.e. what works, where, why and how. Student and faculty use of media and technology, including OER was also discussed. Each week of this online forum focused on a different topic:

Week 1: Why innovation and technology is important in ODL?
Week 2: Challenges and issues in innovation
Week 3: Research and evaluation of technology and innovation in open and distance learning
Week 4: Best practices in technology and innovation in open and distance learning

PROCESS

There were 361 participants who joined this online discussion forum. Over the four weeks, there were 351 replies/comments and 2,925 views under 15 sub-topics created by the lead facilitators. Each week, a poll was conducted on a topic related to the topic of discussion. Many participants were following the discussions, while only about 50 individuals actively contributed. Week 1 and 2 were the most active discussions, with a higher number of people joining in terms of views and posts. In the process, we conducted polls on four different topics, and participants contributed to the development of a competency profile for teachers in open distance and online learning; listed possible research areas for ODL; and identified best practices in the use of technology and innovations.

MAIN ISSUES

There were many issues and challenges that were identified during this forum. Many of the challenges discussed were around implementing innovative technology in education, which included addressing the rapid changes to technology and changing teachers' attitudes toward accepting innovations. In addition, there were discussions around the need for ODL organisations to implement innovations in technology since the new and upcoming generations of students, who are already using technologies such as tablets and smartphones, will expect learning materials to be delivered using emerging technologies. Learning needs to be interactive and learning materials should be delivered using multimedia, which is what students are exposed to when they use social media or the Internet. Other challenges identified included the following:

- use of appropriate technology to reach students in remote locations;
- use of technology to improve the quality of the learning experiences;
- lack of infrastructure and funding for implementing innovative technology;
- teachers are not trained on the use of the technology;
- teachers do not see the benefits of using technology;
- limited internet connectivity restricts what can be done online; and
- lack of support from senior officials, who control organisational budgets.

Participants created a list of 44 competencies that are needed for today's teacher in an ODL system. Some key competencies identified were:
- the ability to collaborate with fellow teachers;
- the ability to use technology to design, develop and deliver teaching and learning;
- knowledge of pedagogical (including andragogy and hautagogy) affordances of technologies;
- understanding the needs of distance learners to design learning activities and provide timely support;
- the ability to multi-task in the context of ODL delivery; and
- the ability to select OER to integrate into a course.

The forum also listed 28 research topics that may require further explorations. Most of the participants focussed on the impact of technology on learning and effectiveness. Some of the topics identified were:
- institutional readiness and staff preparedness for a smooth transition to ODL;
- using learning analytics in ODL;
- application of artificial intelligence in ODL;
- does online delivery meet the expectations of learners?;
- which learning strategy is most effective to teach professional and ethical conduct at a distance?;
- learner readiness for technology use in ODL;
- a longitudinal study, including a target and control group, to establish the effectiveness of technology in enhancing pass rates; and
- comparative studies among and within ODL and conventional educational institutions.

BEST PRACTICES

Participants also identified several best practices in use of technology and innovation. These largely focused on: pedagogical usefulness, evaluation of tools for effectiveness, use of OER, use of mobile devices and smartphones, use of satellite video conferencing and interactive TV to reach remote areas, social media and capacity building of teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are some of the key recommendations that came out of the discussions:

- Use of technology and innovation is imperative to providing access to education and life-long learning for all. Therefore, efforts should be made to reduce challenges associated with use of technology and innovation in ODL institutions.
- Teacher capacity building to use emerging technology should be encouraged to facilitate adoption of innovations by teachers.
- Consider the new generation of digital natives, their learning needs and technology access when designing, developing and delivering courses. Most have access to smartphones and increasingly governments are supporting tablet use. Designing for digital natives should focus on their interests and how to keep their attention on the learning process.
- Availability of learning materials as OER shows that ODL organisations should focus on student support and using technology for supporting learning outcomes.
- Research on technology and innovations for learning needs to be supported and strengthened to provide evidence of impact.

CONNECTION TO THE MAIN THEME OF THE PCF8

This online forum covered a range of issues that complement the papers and posters submitted for presentation at PCF8. There are several papers on MOOCs, learning analytics, OER, mobile learning, mobile app use, social media, learning management systems and technologies such as radio and television. The accompanying discussions at PCF8 will certainly answer some of the questions raised in the online forum. It will also provide a direction towards the range of issues that need further questioning and debate during the deliberations of the various parallel sessions under the technology and innovation sub-theme and add to the discussions on learning for sustainable development.

Key Points for Further Discussion

The online forums discussed several issues and indicated a range of concerns, challenges and best practices for achieving sustainable development though the use of open, online and flexible learning. Some of the key points that could be further discussed during PCF8 are how we can:

- increase access to learning for the disadvantaged and the marginalised;
- ensure development of OER in local languages and in accessible formats;
- encourage use and integration of OER in teaching practices to improve student learning;
- develop communities of practice to share experiences on open, distance and online learning;
- develop strategies to build capacities for open, distance and online learning;
- use open, distance and online learning for skill development;
- use technology and innovation to provide access to education and lifelong learning for all;
- design courses and programmes for digital natives;
- focus open, distance and online learning research on access, equity, quality of learning, costs, technologies and accreditation;
- create mechanisms for student tracking and increase use of data to improve ODL systems; and
- improve availability of support and funding for research on technology-mediated learning.