Measuring Institutional Readiness for Flexibility in Teaching and Learning: The Ten Indicators

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Hello, everyone. At the outset let me thank ICDE and Open Polytechnic New Zealand for giving me this opportunity to speak to you at this Virtual ICDE Leadership Summit 2021. Special thanks to Mark Nichols and his team for putting together the programme and managing the logistics. The theme of the conference is "Leadership for Responsiveness: Are we flexible enough?".

My presentation will take this theme forward and provide a framework to measure flexible learning in organisations. Leaders can do self-audit and take appropriate actions based on the framework.

I have three specific areas for my presentation. First, I will provide a context as to how flexible learning is important in today's world to provide access to lifelong learning opportunities. Second, I will provide an overview of flexible learning in practice. Third, I will present the practical framework for measuring flexible learning in institutions.

First the context. Tertiary education enrollment is a key indicator of development. The world average is about 40%, while it is below 10% in sub-Saharan Africa. Many Commonwealth countries also have below 20% enrollment of the relevant age group in higher education.

ICT has been playing a critical role in education, especially during the Pandemic. However, there is huge disparity in access to ICTs around the world. While Mobile penetration is more than 100%, Internet access is only about 51%. Also, we should consider that the world average is not an indicator of access in the Pacific countries or for that matter in countries in Africa. The access to computer, mobile and Internet is a key issue, and several experts and agencies these days call for Internet as human right.

Access to learning resources is a challenge for many students. In the Unites States students spend USD 1200 per year. Over 5.2 million students use financial aid to purchase their textbooks. About 65% students inform that their grades are affected due to non-purchase of required textbooks. In Bangladesh higher education students on average spend BDT 1850 per year. In Malaysia, 76.4% learners decide not to buy textbooks due to high costs.

In a recent study on access to learning materials in the Commonwealth, we found that learners are spending way above their affordability on textbooks. For example, in St Lucia, the average spending on textbooks is about ECD700.

Skills shortage is yet another problem being faced by many countries. Convinced that higher education leads to higher earnings and social mobility, most governments have invested heavily in higher education. But even where there is increased access to tertiary education, it is not a passport to employment. A recent study indicated about 45% employers cannot find skilled individuals to recruit. Automation of jobs is changing the employment landscape as well.

Youth unemployment in some Commonwealth countries is exceptionally high. The pandemic has further worsened the situation. What do we need to do differently to make our youth ready for employment and entrepreneurship?

Overall, we are grappling with some serious global educational challenges: Increasing access to higher education, improving quality, reducing gender inequality, reducing unemployment, and providing lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities to all.

On the top of these challenges, COVID-19 has further identified our lack of preparedness in terms of technology access in institutions, teacher capacities, and growing inequalities due to over reliance on ICTs. Overall, the context provides an opportunity to rethink education.

However, are we ready for change? Where is the thinking to shift from 'business as usual'? There has been a focus on 're-opening' rather than 'rethinking'.

Professor Barnett presents a framework for classifying the universities based on how knowledge is created and distributed. Accordingly, we have ivory tower institutions at one end and open and distance teaching universities in other providing access to knowledge in a more flexible manner.

We know that ODL institutions have seen five different stages of development. But it is not necessary that all institutions are now in stage 5. Several are still in stage 3 or 4. The key here in these models or stages is the flexibility accorded to the learners by open and distance learning.

The idea of flexibility can be traced back to Lord Crowther, who in the context of openness, articulated the that open university is open to people, places, methods, and ideas.

In practice, flexibility can be included in distance teaching universities as well as face-to-face institutions and dual-mode institutions by reducing rigidities of the conventional approaches to teaching and learning. Some of the examples of flexibility are providing open entry irrespective of qualifications, permitting to study anywhere and not to force attendance in a physical class, allowing study at a time suitable to the learner, and providing a flexible option to choose course of study. Many of these conditions can also be offered by face-to-face teaching universities.

I have extended the flexibility options by reviewing the literature in the field and present ten dimensions to measure the flexibility in our institutions.

Entry requirement could range from completely closed to completely open. Within this continuum, an institution can be rated in a scale of 1-10, where they fit based on number of courses that allow anyone to join without enforcing rigid entry requirements.

Learning space could range from anywhere learning to a fixed location. Some universities have multiple locations providing options to learners may fall in between.

Time to study is related to how the teaching is structured. Does is require a specific schedule or learners can complete study asynchronously? Even in online education provisions, more use of synchronous session could lead to lower score.

The curricular options available to learner is the next item to check for flexibility. University course are often used in combination to offer programmes. The level of flexibility provided to learners to decide what to study would be covered in this domain. Some programmes have no option, while others provide open choice to design the curriculum. Such curricular flexibility would require more logistical issues for the administration, but it is worth considering.

The pedagogical approach adopted in courses would vary due to the subject and the comfort level of the teacher to adopt innovations. However, in this framework, I am proposing how students and teachers collaborate/engage to construct meaning and learning. So, courses and programme in an institution may be classified in a range of 1 to 10 with lecture dominated courses as 1 to courses with highly collaborative learning designs as 10.

Technology is more a administrative aspect of educational delivery than a pedagogic aspect. However, technology could influence flexibility of a course in terms of access and equity. Thus, I proffer the use of open-source tools to provide access to teaching and learning with limited use of proprietary tools that the student needs to buy. Many institutions buy proprietary software for the students, the cost of which in-turn are passed on to the students as tuition fees.

The use of proprietary and openly licensed resources in teaching and learning is a key flexible option. We know that cost of learning materials has impact on the decision to enrol in a course. Using open education resources could lead to Zero-textbook cost.

Higher education institutions focus on assessment as the key indicator for quality. It is the bedrock of trust of the society on education. However, assessment has become more rigid where institutions decide when and how the assessment will be carried out. There is no flexibility given to learners to choose from amongst different ways of assessment. How flexible is your assessment system? Are you ready to provide different options, like a research route and a publication route for doctoral degree? Can the student take test as an on-demand activity?

What a student receive at the end of a course of study is a credential. Is this recognised globally, or the qualification is more suitable for a local context. This is not important in many national contexts, but as the world is becoming more and more global, recognition of degree/credential elsewhere without difficulty is a key component of flexibility. This also mean the provision to permit accumulation of credentials for receiving recognised degree.

The last dimension in my flexibility framework is cost. High and low cost can be a relative concept in different economies. One end is total free of cost and the other is high cost. For educational institutions, courses/certificates can never by totally free of cost. However, calculating the cost as high or low can be done considering how much of the total cost of delivery is subsidised. The more subsidy a course receives, the less cost it is to the learners.

To give an example, I have taken a hypothetical institution and scored according to the 10 dimensions, where the minimum score could be 10 and maximum 100. In this case the score is 57, which can be interpreted as moderately flexible.

I hope the flexibility framework would be useful. Thank you for your attention.