

Soaring Above the Pandemic: innovative and creative practices



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Distinguished Colleagues, thank you for the invitation to the first International Conference on Society and Technology 2021. My topic today is ‘Soaring above the pandemic: innovative and creative practices’, which focuses on the silver lining rather than the dark clouds experienced during the pandemic.

But first a word about the Commonwealth of Learning. COL is an intergovernmental organisation with headquarters in Canada. Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training. Malaysia is an important member of COL, and we are very grateful for your consistent financial and intellectual support.

COL has been working with Universiti Malaysia Sabah since 2018 to systematically implement technology-enabled learning. It started with a baseline study of TEL for teachers and students, leading to the development of a TEL policy, and a series of workshops to build staff capacity. A study on student learning experience was conducted, helping the university to mainstream blended learning. In 2020, UMS came forward to use COL’s TEL benchmarking toolkit to further strengthen TEL. This in itself has become an innovative model for other institutions to emulate.

During the pandemic, COL supported UMS to develop capacity in the design and development of MOOCs. A pilot MOOC on Biorisk management was offered and I am told that there are about 30 MOOCs under development. UMS also offers COL’s C-DELTA Programme to its students. So, you can see the strong partnership that COL and UMS enjoy.

In this presentation, I will look at some of the issues encountered during covid 19—and how the global community responded. Let us then celebrate some of the international interventions that helped teachers and students soar above the pandemic. I will share some of the creative and innovative activities of COL to ensure that no one was left behind. This will lead to a reflection on the implications for higher education and how we can build on the momentum generated and ride the wave into a better post-covid world.

The biggest disruption of the pandemic has been the closure of campuses where more than 220 million HE students worldwide were affected.

Most institutions found the greatest challenge related to digital infrastructure—lack of access to devices, connectivity, electricity even when they pivoted to emergency remote learning. Teachers were not

prepared for the sudden transition to online learning. Existing inequalities were further exacerbated, and generally educational institutions reported a learning loss.

But as we know, crisis generates creativity. The silver lining here was the global acceptance of distance and online learning. A recent study in the UK found that the majority of HE students rated the quality of online learning as excellent.

How did teachers respond? Data from OECD countries indicates that only 60% of teachers had some training in ICTs. Yet teachers rose to the occasion. A survey conducted in Europe found that most teachers live-streamed lectures synchronously. A large number of teachers also used asynchronous approaches by sending pre-recorded videos and audio lectures.

The vulnerable are most impacted in crisis situations. It is estimated that the numbers of school dropouts will increase with 11 million girls not likely to return. But as the existing inequalities have been highlighted, there is a sense of urgency in finding targeted solutions for those on the other side of the digital divide.

The pandemic has deepened the existing learning crisis. A study in the Netherlands, records a learning loss of about 3 percentile points with higher losses among students from less-educated homes.

But was it really a learning loss? It is true that learning was indeed lost as the curriculum could not be covered because of the disruption. But as some suggest, the term ‘learning loss’ introduces a deficit mindset that demotivates the learners and does not appreciate the effort that teachers put in. Amidst this learning loss was a ‘learning gain’ where over and above the curriculum, both teachers and learners learnt to be resilient, managed their time better, acquired basic computer skills to learn and collaborated on various social media platforms. All these are relevant skills that will help students be better prepared for the future.

Internationally, we have seen several key interventions that helped people soar above the pandemic.

One has been the phenomenal increase in MOOC enrolments not just of global brands such as Coursera and FutureLearn but universities which had hesitated to offer online courses came forward to offer MOOCs especially for professional development.

The pandemic has also seen the second coming of video learning where teachers made significant contributions often reaching their students through mobile devices.

Formal assessments and proctoring systems suffered major setbacks during the pandemic—where institutions adopted innovative approaches to build flexible models and make assessments more authentic. UNISA developed App-based assessments; Griffith University Australia used oral assessments for the business programme and India introduced open book exams at scale.

Open Educational Resources were in high demand as teachers looked for quality digital content. In a North American study conducted during the pandemic, 44% of administrators were positive about faculty use of OER, while a quarter of teachers believed that OER could contribute significantly to teaching and learning. A study conducted by OER Foundation and COL in May 2020 found that over 75% of the respondents expressed high demand for OER-based online courses.

The mobility of international students plummeted with travel restrictions and the closure of borders. This led to new possibilities and the increased importance of hybrid models and branch campuses providing an opportunity for students to experience ‘internationalisation at home’.

Several institutions, particularly in Europe, came up with innovative solutions during this time—they deferred payment of fees and provided financial support for at-risk students.

COL too responded by sharing its resources and expertise with ministries of education and universities.

As soon as the pandemic struck, COL developed a series of guidelines and instruments for planning and implementing online and blended courses.

Building the capacity of teachers across the Commonwealth was a top priority and several MOOCs and online courses targeting teachers were offered on topics such as blended and mobile learning including cyber security.

In low-bandwidth contexts in the Pacific, a video-on-demand service was offered using OER aligned to the curriculum of Fiji, Nauru, Samoa and Tonga.

The launch of the COL-COURSERA workforce recovery programme reached 150000 Commonwealth citizens including Malaysians with free skilling and reskilling opportunities from some of the top universities in the world. Even though connectivity was often a challenge, learners used mobile devices or library facilities in what has been a life-changing experience for thousands.

COL's Aptus is a low-cost server which works with a wireless router and solar charger to create an offline virtual classroom—this is particularly useful in reaching remote communities with high quality digital courses was done recently in Maldives.

COL has just launched COL Commons, a platform that offers free micro-courses in professional areas for just-in-time learning. Teachers and students may find this a useful resource.

During the pandemic, collaboration and resource-sharing became critical for keeping the doors of learning open. COL's International Partnership attracted over 60 organisations and institutions, where they have contributed 200 online courses.

What are the implications of all these developments for higher education?

The university management must develop enabling policies for mainstreaming ODL and blended approaches while also investing in technology infrastructure and quality assurance. The quality of an institution was always measured by inputs, processes and outputs with student pass rates at the centre. With rising youth unemployment, the employability of graduates will be a key indicator of quality. Management must also develop policies that specifically ensure that no one is left behind.

Universities need to rethink the curriculum to make it more work integrated with internships. Harnessing the potential of OER can be one way forward. More flexible and blended approaches can be implemented to address the needs of different constituencies. Creative ways of assessments and credentialling will be key. And research will provide the evidence of the efficiency and effectiveness of these approaches.

Both teachers and students will need support for making the transition from digital literacy to digital fluency to thrive in the new normal. Institutions will need to pay more attention to the well-being of their staff and students through expert counselling and guidance.

The time has come for universities to play a leadership role in building resilient societies and ride the waves of change. For example, we have seen a huge rise in self-directed learning during the pandemic—we can build on these foundations to promote lifelong learning for all and foster an ecosystem that provides learning for livelihoods.

To sum up, if we want to be innovative and creative to soar above the pandemic, we need to transform education— make education enjoyable, engaging, efficient, effective, and ethical. First, enjoyable learning helps the retention and transfer of knowledge to long-term memory. Second, making learning engaging requires pedagogy as well as innovative applications of technology. Third, learning needs to be efficient in terms of time and resources. Fourth, education must be effective and lead to livelihoods and responsible citizenship. Fifth, education is ethical, for it addresses issues of privacy, cyber security, and equity.

On that note, let me thank you for your kind attention and wish the conference every success.