

7th Krishna Kanta Handiqui Memorial Lecture  
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**From Response to Resilience:  
Preparing for the Use of Open and Distance Learning in the next Crisis  
or  
Putting the 'OPEN' back in ODL**

Sir John Daniel

**Introduction**

It is an honour to give the 7th Krishna Kanta Handiqui Memorial Lecture. I thank Vice-Chancellor Kandarpa Das for his kind invitation and I regret that this terrible pandemic prevents me from being with you in person. During my career I have made many visits to India, but never to your beautiful state of Assam.

My first trip to India was in the early 1980s, when I went to Hyderabad to visit the great Professor Ram Reddy, who had set up the Andhra Pradesh Open University in 1982. After he moved to establish the Indira Gandhi National Open University in 1985, I met him regularly. It was a great privilege to be honoured with him by the International Council for Distance Education just before his untimely death in 1995.

I have been associated with the open universities of India for almost 40 years, as President of the International Council for Distance Education, as Vice-Chancellor of the UK Open University, as Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO and as President of the Commonwealth of Learning.

It is thus a particular pleasure to speak to you today in honour of Krishna Kanta Handiqui. I feel an affinity with this great scholar after whom your university is named. We both attended Oxford University, and both moved from there to the University of Paris. We both became vice-chancellors of universities.

However, we responded to these experiences in different ways. Professor Krishna Kanta Handiqui became a great linguist, knowing over ten languages, whereas, although my French is fluent, my knowledge of German, Italian, Russian and Spanish is rudimentary.

On the other hand, he described his nine years as Vice-Chancellor of Gauhati University as 'a sterile period', whereas my eleven years as Vice-Chancellor of the UK Open University were the most exciting and rewarding period of my career. He was a great scholar, whereas, despite my 400 publications, I am, at best, a practitioner-scholar who tries to reflect intelligently on his experience of leading and managing universities. That is what I shall do today. I wonder how Professor Krishna Kanta Handiqui would have reflected on the situation of higher education in India today.

My title is, *From Response to Resilience: Preparing for the Use of Open and Distance Learning in the next Crisis*. To this I have added a sub-title, *Putting the OPEN back in ODL*.

We are slowly leaving behind us the savage crisis of the covid-19 pandemic, which required rapid responses from higher education institutions around the world. Now we need to prepare for the next crisis, which will surely come. I use the word resilience to mean that all institutions must be tough enough to adapt to new circumstances and to survive without breaking. But in the case of open universities like yours I go further. Your challenge is not merely to survive covid-19 and future crises but to remain at the leading edge of the adaptation of higher education to changing technologies and society's evolving needs. That is how I interpret the significance of the word 'open' in the title of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University.

The history of distance education will be a thread running through this talk. It will lead us to the present day, when the covid-19 pandemic has stimulated considerable expansion of distance learning, although much of its spread should really be called 'emergency remote teaching'.

What has been the impact of the pandemic? It has been both good and bad.

The good outcome of all the remote teaching of the last 18 months is that millions of students and teachers on school and university campuses have acquired some experience of distance learning and distance teaching. Many have come to appreciate its advantages.

The bad result is that this surge in remote teaching has usually removed the word, 'open', from the term 'open and distance learning'. Institutions have focussed on the students who were previously in their classrooms, so it was really 'closed' distance learning. But openness has been an essential theme and purpose of the development of distance education. It is vital that we put that inspiring word, 'open'. back into open and distance learning.

### **Distance education: a brief history**

I start with some history. Most of you are familiar with the narrative, but many people who first experienced distance education during the covid-19 pandemic assume that ODL began with the emergence of the internet in the late 1990s. It really began much earlier and the principles of good distance teaching that have been developed over more than a century are equally valid today, although they are often forgotten until bitter experience reminds teachers and institutions of them.

The development of distance education has paralleled the emergence of technologies that facilitate communication when teachers and learners are separated.

Gutenberg's invention of printing in the 15th century was a first milestone. Instead of having to go to universities to hear lecturers read from the few manuscripts available, students could now access printed books themselves, giving more choice of places and times to study.

We jump from Gutenberg to the building of railways in the 19th century, which allowed countries to create postal systems.

Sir Isaac Pitman had invented Shorthand in 1837 and, following the introduction of uniform postal rates across Britain in the 1840s, he offered the world's first distance education course. He taught his Shorthand system by mailing texts transcribed into Shorthand on postcards and receiving transcriptions, in return, from his students for correction. Pitman's crucial innovation was giving feedback to students. His motto was: *'time saved is life gained'*, which captures nicely the advantages of both Shorthand and distance education.

Although a few public school systems and universities offered some correspondence courses over the next century, distance education was mostly conducted commercially and struggled to achieve a reputation for quality, even when it was offered by public universities here in India. This situation changed dramatically in 1971 with the opening of the UK Open University.

The Open University's inspiring slogan: 'open to people, open to places, open to methods, open to ideas' springs to mind when we think of that great innovation.

But please note that the driving motivation of Walter Perry, its founding vice-chancellor, was to improve the quality of teaching in all universities. Before coming to the UKOU, Perry was deputy principal of Edinburgh University, where he observed that the quality of teaching in campus universities was dismal. He believed that if the Open University could be an exemplar of excellent teaching, it would raise the level in all universities. Think about that: is KKHSOU an exemplar of excellent teaching today? Are campus universities following your example?

What did the UKOU do differently? Perry considered that its most important innovation was the course team. As the UKOU website puts it:

*'Modules are developed by multi-disciplinary course teams comprising:*

- *Academics, educational technologists and media specialists contributing pedagogic and technical expertise*
- *Respected academics from other universities working alongside OU colleagues*
- *External examiners.*

*'This model has helped to build the University's reputation for innovation, rigour and quality and has been adopted by distance teaching institutions worldwide'* (Open University, 2021).

Perry once said that the UKOU had institutionalized innovation and he believed that the course teams were the key driver of its constant renewal. When I used the word 'open' earlier to mean the capacity to adapt effectively to new challenges this constant renewal is what I meant. Does KKHSOU have mechanisms for constant renewal?

While Perry sought to improve the quality of teaching, others saw openness as the UKOU's radical innovation, for as well as teaching at a distance and being 'open to places', the UKOU declared that it was 'open to people' by removing all academic prerequisites for enrolment. The basis for admission was 'first come, first served', up to the capacity that the institution could cope with.

The phrase, 'open to methods', also reinforced the expansion of access, because broadcasting on the BBC's public radio and television channels was part of the UKOU's multi-media teaching

strategy. Harold Wilson, the UK prime minister who launched the open university, first called it the 'University of the Air'. He considered that an important manifestation of openness and access was enabling the general public to join students in watching the university teach on TV and listening to its radio programmes. It is good to see that occurring extensively in India!

The UKOU was formally launched in the week of the first moon landing in 1969. Its first Chancellor, Lord Crowther, exhorted it to be 'open to ideas' with these words: 'What a happy chance it is that we start on this task in this very week when the Universe has opened! The word has a new meaning henceforward. The limits, not only of explorable space, but of human understanding, are infinitely wider than we have believed.'

The creation of the UKOU inspired similar developments in other jurisdictions. KKHSOU is an inheritor of that tradition. There are now some 50 institutions around the world called 'open universities', and the Commonwealth of Learning has documented the many open universities in the Commonwealth.

Today my sub-title is: *Putting the OPEN back in ODL*. Why is that so important?

The challenging reality is that many millions more people will seek education at all levels in the next twenty years.

When I served as Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO my most important task was to give new impetus to the campaign for Education for All, that had begun in 1990 and been given fresh momentum by a World Forum held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000. The early years of this century saw an intense focus on getting all children into primary school. By our target date of 2015 this campaign had achieved success at getting most young children into school. Primary school net enrolment rose from 84% in 1999 to 93% in 2015, but progress then stalled, with 58 million children still not in school and 100 million not completing their primary studies. Covid-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities. In low-income countries only 34% of children from the poorest fifth of households complete school, compared to 79% from the richest fifth. As you know, that is a serious challenge in India.

The primary education campaign revealed, however, that universal secondary education would be a much more challenging goal. A 2006 estimate indicated that nearly 400 million children in developing countries between the ages of 12 and 17 did not attend secondary school and that figure was still 200 million in 2018.

So, schooling remains a huge challenge. The UN estimates that in 2030 over 200 million children will still be out of school.

India is a world leader in developing solutions, because you established a National Open School in 1989. Renamed the National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS) in 2002, it became an apex body for distance learning with responsibility for facilitating the development of a network of state open schools. The NIOS is very successful. It has 2.2 million pupils enrolled and admits 350,000 annually. All this with a central staff of only 250 for over 2 million pupils. The tutors

and mentors who support the pupils work in 11 regional centres and 3,260 study centres located in accredited institutions of various kinds.

The situation of India's state open schools is mixed. Ten years ago, a report on them concluded: 'Taking an overall view, one cannot escape the conclusion that with very few exceptions, the State Open Schools resemble atrophied limbs of the State Education Department. They are like rudderless ships set adrift in a sea of low morale. This is a poignant situation when one considers the immense potential of State Open Schools to bring about a sea-change in the social set-up and improve the economic well-being of the underprivileged people'.

You will know better than I whether that assessment is still true, but I note two points. First, it is not easy to establish and operate an ODL institution that can function at scale with a hugely diverse body of pupils. Second, we need these open schools to be successful to help people acquire the skills and knowledge to lead fulfilling lives.

This is why we must put the 'open' back into ODL. Distance education at scale is necessary because growing numbers of people worldwide, numbering in the hundreds of millions, have no access to the education and training that might help them to enjoy better lives. Three key areas of need are: secondary schooling for the hard to reach; tertiary education; and new skills and knowledge for coping with the post-pandemic world.

Goal 4 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 embraces all three areas. It states: '*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*'. It includes seven targets; we note two in particular:

*4.1 Ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes*

*4.3 Ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.*

Each targets covers hundreds of millions of people, and I have already talked about target 4.1.

Target 4.3 is about access to tertiary education, which did not figure in the Millennium Development Goals. Its inclusion in the more recent Sustainable Development Goals reflects governments' increasing understanding of the contribution of higher education to economic and social development. With larger numbers completing secondary school and societies becoming more complex, demand for tertiary education has grown rapidly. Official estimates of the future demand for tertiary education have usually been gross underestimates.

Nearly 30 years ago, in my book, *Mega-Universities*, I wrote that: 'population growth is outpacing the world's capacity to give people access to universities. A sizeable new university would now be needed every week merely to sustain current participation rates in higher education. New institutions are not being created at this frequency. A crisis of access lies ahead'.

In this century the demand for tertiary education has accelerated. Global enrolments are predicted to grow from 250m in 2020 to nearly 600m in 2040. This assumes that enrolment

ratios worldwide will rise from 2,700 per 100,000 population to 6,500. Participation rates will grow everywhere, with the share of the 15+ population educated to degree level reaching around 50% in countries such as Canada, Finland, Singapore and South Korea by 2050. Although these projections were made before covid-19, its fall-out seems likely to increase demand further.

However rapidly campus institutions grow in response, distance education at scale will be a major component of the solution, not least because the global response to climate change will favour education systems that are less carbon intensive.

That poses a challenge for open universities like yours because technologies and expectations have evolved since the creation of the UK Open University 50 years ago. In particular, that means the internet which, unlike earlier distance learning media, was seized on by campus institutions when they had to teach remotely. The challenge for open universities is to use this newer technology appropriately for their own students.

This is a moving target. I well remember giving my address to the annual congress of the UKOU student association in the mid-1990s.

Afterwards they chastised me, saying that the Open University was moving too quickly to require them to work with computers and go online. Yet, when I went back to address the student congress two years later, they complained that the University was not moving fast enough!

I suspect that you know the feeling! Your challenge is to be fully aware of the leading edge of educational technology, but to use the trailing edge in your teaching to ensure that it is accessible to your students. But the trailing edge moves quickly too. It may be too early for you to use artificial intelligence and virtual reality, but, for example, you should stay ahead of the campus universities in using technology for remote tutoring and examinations.

SDG Target 4.3 also includes tertiary continuing education. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are a 21st century example of conducting distance education at scale for a global audience. Around 2010, some university computing academics used the internet to attempt computer-based teaching across the globe. It recalled the moment in the mid-19th century when the inventor of Shorthand, Isaac Pitman, decided to teach his new language by correspondence using the newly created postal service.

As enthusiasm for MOOCs burgeoned, the universities which had started them realized that they could not satisfy the demand by relying solely on their own academics. They invited other universities to join in, suggesting that offering short courses to large global audiences would be an attractive way to enhance their reputations. A simple definition of MOOCs is: 'a course of study made available over the internet without charge to a very large number of people'. This definition highlights the 'easy-come-easy-go' nature of MOOCs. Nevertheless, although completion rates are usually dismal, the huge worldwide enrolments in MOOCs indicate that they are a legitimate aspect of open and distance learning.

The number of MOOC learners worldwide was estimated at 180 million in 2020. They were studying some 16,000 MOOCs offered by nearly 1,000 universities. One-third of all learners who ever registered on a MOOC platform did so in 2020, which was evidence of a pandemic-induced surge of interest in free online learning. The UK Open University saw the number of visitors to its OpenLearn website of 1,000 free courses jump from 8.9 to 13.6 million between 2019 and 2020. Surveys showed that one in seven UK adults started an online course during the pandemic.

I have urged you to become more resilient and to be open to new trends. This is the last one I will mention. The pandemic has greatly increased public interest in open and distance learning. It has also led to a demand for shorter courses on newer topics that can be taken at any time at the learners' convenience. The world's open universities, including yours, should be at the forefront of responding to those new demands and those new needs.

In closing I pay homage again to the memory of Krishna Kanta Handiqui and I leave you with the founding slogan of the UK Open University:

To be 'open to people, open to places, open to methods and open to ideas'.

Keep that in mind and KKHSOU is assured of a bright future!

Thank you.