

**Commonwealth of Learning
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ODL for TVET: WHY and HOW?

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CW FLAGS

Good day to you all. It is a pleasure to talk to a group of Caribbean educators again. During my eight years as president of COL I went to the Caribbean frequently and visited all the Commonwealth countries in your region. I am proud of our work there and I retain wonderful memories of the lively and competent people that we worked with. I think particularly the dedicated work of COL's national focal points, who ensured that COL's successive strategic plans reflected the real needs of each Caribbean country.

TVET AT COL

It was also during my time at COL that we expanded our work in TVET - Technical and Vocational Education and Training. TVET has always been the poor relation of academic studies, particularly in the minds of parents - and this attitude was prevalent in the Caribbean. That is slowly changing. The United Nations believes that increasing TVET will be even more important for young people today than academic studies.

UN SDGS TVET

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 are very clear. Both TVET and higher education have a higher profile in these goals than they did in the previous Millennium Development Goals, that guided us when I was at UNESCO and COL.

SESSION TITLE

You have important roles in helping your countries strive toward those goals, so I am pleased to talk to you about leadership for open and distance learning, or ODL, in TVET.

I have titled my remarks 'ODL in TVET: WHY and HOW?' I shall take a 'big-picture' approach to the topic. COL's experts and consultants can help you with the specifics of using ODL for TVET. I shall focus simply on two questions: why is it important to use ODL in TVET, and how do you do it effectively? I hope that my responses to these two questions will help you convince the sceptics in your ministries and your institutions that ODL must be a vital component of their work in expanding TVET.

ODL WHY?

First then, why use ODL in expanding TVET?

UNESCO

Before joining COL I was the Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO in Paris. The core of my job was to advance the Education for All project that had been launched in 1990 and given new impetus in the UN's Millennium Declaration in 2000.

EFA PRIMARY AND SECONDARY

From 2000 to 2015 we made good progress in getting children into primary school. But this only highlighted the challenge of secondary schooling, which is where much of TVET occurs. Although the numbers missing out on secondary schooling dropped from 400 million to 200 million between 2006 and 2018, I do not need to tell you that the covid-19 pandemic undid much of that progress because many countries closed their schools for long periods. This was particularly damaging for TVET students.

UN SDGS 4.1 & 4.3

The UN Sustainable Development Goals that I mentioned were formulated before the pandemic. But they are now even more vital because covid-19 has taken us backwards.

CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATION

Governments and Ministries of Education face three key challenges in running their education systems.

First, they want to give access to education and training to everyone. That was the goal of the global Education for All programme that I worked on at UNESCO.

Second, they want to raise educational quality. Attending school is not an end in itself. Its aim is to enable people to do new things and to make a valuable contribution to their communities.

Third, they want to get costs down. This is essential in a global recession with all budgets being squeezed.

In the case of TVET there are three additional aims.

FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL

First, to blur the distinction between the formal and non-formal sectors. Many of your young people work in the informal sector. But that is a huge part of your economies and we should educate people for it in a systematic way.

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Second, we must build bridges between knowledge acquisition and skills development. ODL can be particularly helpful in that regard.

REDUCE INEQUALITIES

Third, we must reduce inequalities, and this has always been a special focus of ODL.

I find it helpful to take these three goals of wider access, better quality and lower cost and represent them by a triangle.

IRON TRIANGLE

I call this the iron triangle because, if you are restricted to face-to-face teaching you cannot bend this triangle to achieve all these goals. Let me explain.

ACCESS

Try to increase access by putting more students in each class. You will be accused of lowering quality. Or, if you do it by adding more teachers, you will increase costs.

QUALITY

Suppose that you try to increase quality by providing better learning materials or smaller classes. Costs will rise which may also reduce access.

COSTS

Finally, if you try to reduce costs directly, both quality and access may decline.

IRON TRIANGLE

This iron triangle illustrates the inevitable constraints of classroom teaching, which have always been there. This explains why many people associate quality education with exclusive education. They assume that you cannot have quality education without excluding most people from it.

STRETCHED TRIANGLE

Clearly, we should reconfigure the three variables of access, quality, and cost into a flexible triangle, which allows quality and access to increase without adding costs.

CHALLENGE ACCESS ETC

How can this be done? Are there examples of it being done? The answer is 'yes'. I give examples of a school, a university, and an institution for continuing education.

INDIA OPEN SCHOOL

The school is India's National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), which enrolls two million pupils and takes in 300,000 new ones every year. Its methods are a combination of distance learning materials for use at home and thousands of study centres across the country where the pupils go for face-to-face tutoring and practical work. NIOS has been a pioneer in offering TVET through ODL.

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

In higher education I give the example of the UK Open University, of which I was vice-chancellor for ten years. It enrolls over 100,000 students and attempts to be open to people, open to places, open to methods and open to ideas - in other words to reduce the barriers to education wherever it can.

MY BOOKS

I have written a book about the world's open universities and another about the open schools. These describe these remarkable institutions in detail.

MOOCS

My final example, from continuing education, is MOOCs - Massive Open Online Courses. These are online courses, mostly offered free, on a huge range of subjects. I have taken 20 of them myself and really enjoyed them. Many MOOCs are on TVET topics.

THREE EXAMPLES

These three successful examples show that it is possible simultaneously to increase access, improve quality and cut costs. This is key impact of technology on education.

So how is it done?

ADAM SMITH

The answer is technology. The basic principles are not new. They were articulated by the economist and social thinker, Adam Smith, in the 18th century.

Adam Smith identified the key drivers of the industrial revolution that was transforming Europe at that time. These were: division of labour, specialisation, economies of scale and the use of machines - which today means information technology.

ODL HOW?

That brings me nicely to my second question for today. How do you offer ODL successfully.

THREE-LEGGED STOOL

Earlier I gave you the Iron Triangle. I like to think in threes so now I give you the analogy of a three-legged stool. The ODL student is sitting on the stool and must be supported by three legs. If any one of the three legs is weak the stool collapses and she cannot complete the course.

LEARNING MATERIALS

The first leg is learning materials. There are many ways of presenting these. In MOOCs the materials are online, but the open universities also use printed books, videos, and audiocassettes. Producing such materials yields economies of scale, giving low unit costs and allowing you to invest in quality. Current technologies lend themselves well to the simulations and manipulations that teaching TVET requires.

ADMINISTRATION

The second leg is administration. Students at a distance depend on efficient administration even more than students on campus. Today administration of ODL means IT systems that must be user-friendly. This area is developing fast. Before long learning analytics may help to diagnose students in difficulty even before they know it.

STUDENT SUPPORT

The third leg of the stool is student support. The support that ODL institutions give to individual students, on both academic and administrative issues, correlates well with student success and completion rates. For example, MOOCs, which provide very little personal support to learners, have very low completion rates. This does not mean that MOOCs are not valuable, only that learners who are seeking to obtain a formal qualification should choose an ODL system that does provide support.

Before I conclude I must mention two important pairs of terms.

INTERACTION/INDEPENDENCE, SYNCHRONICITY AND ASYNCHRONICITY

During the pandemic many institutions used technologies like Zoom to teach classes live but at a distance. This gave a false impression to teachers new to ODL, that all open and distance learning requires live interaction.

This is simply not true. The most effective components of ODL are often the learning materials, in multiple formats, that learners can study independently. Live interaction with teachers is also important, which is why I stressed the provision of student support, but good ODL requires a good balance of independent and interactive activities.

Somewhat related is the distinction between synchronous distance learning, like Zoom classes where everyone is online at the same time, and asynchronous learning that students can do in their own time. This is very important for activities like the simulations and experiments that are vital for TVET students.

ONLINE LEARNING

Please keep these distinctions in mind when you engage in online learning. Do not fall into the trap of thinking that all online learning and teaching must be live, interactive, and synchronous.

I'll stop there and we can discuss what I've said and its application to TVET. I leave you with my two triads.

IRON TRIANGLE

I hope that you find the Iron Triangle a useful way to think about the revolution that technology can create in education.

THREE-LEGGED STOOL

And that the three-legged stool is a useful way to stress the three vital elements of good ODL.

THANK YOU