

ICDE Policy Forum 2013

“Directions and Challenges for government and institutions when post-secondary tertiary education moves into the MOOC territory: public policies and institutional strategies in the digital learning age”

Introduction

In the last three decades, there has been a stable growth in tertiary education. The projections for the next three decades indicate a large growth in the number of students enrolled in tertiary education, most of which are estimated to take place online, in open and distance learning (ODL) settings. The recently emerged MOOCs constitute one of the possibilities within these scenarios, bringing particular attention to ODL.

Despite the background work developed in ODL throughout the world, there are important challenges that remain to be addressed in this field. Based on the development of ODL in the past, an evolutionary approach leads to the acknowledgement of possible ways to tackle these issues, identifying how they should be addressed and who should be involved: governments, organisations, regional associations and local institutions.

Global organisations and associations are well aware of the issues and challenges that governments (policy-making) and institutions (decision-making) are facing. The challenges faced by ODL actors in tertiary education are varied, and are related to legal, organisational, pedagogical and practical matters, for instance:

- How much of a regulatory framework is needed?
- Which kinds of quality mechanisms are needed?
- How to ensure that faculty has an active role in the development of programmes and content?
- How to create a joint agenda that leads to an evolution?

A more enlightened use of technology in education and the development of media literacy competencies still remain challenging, and are regarded as key-points in the move from the Information Society into the Knowledge Society, in order to address the disconnection between technology tools and education systems. Although the internet infrastructure and access have had significant developments, it cannot be forgotten that internet penetration is still low in some parts of the world.

Considering the variety of ODL challenges and actors, there is an increasing demand for collaborative efforts, engaging stakeholders both in the market place and local communities, bearing in mind their real needs and drivers towards social change.

Challenges

Part I - Challenges for Institutions

1. The lack of a strategy for openness, promoting different forms of education, focused on widening access to different target-groups, considering: learners' needs, quality, efficiency, cost reduction, branding, teacher training, ODL tools, institutional policy, etc.
2. The need to focus on cultural and linguistic diversity, engaging in open education in order to provide access to disadvantaged populations.
3. The need to revise Higher Education organisational models, in order to adapt to ODL changing scenarios, focusing on a clear definition of business models.
4. The need for a policy statement that addresses online universities.
5. Inexistence of guidelines on e-accessibility and e-content.
6. Reduced involvement of students and faculty in ODL planning.
7. Insufficient ODL and digital literacy among faculty, following as an effect: the scarce integration of ICT in teaching practices; the predominance of a technical usage instead of a pedagogical usage of ICT; the unawareness of ODL challenges (e.g. OER, MOOCs).
8. The need for dissemination of good practices in teaching and learning in technology enhanced learning and ODL.
9. The lack of solid evidence in OER and MOOCs benefits, practices and contexts.

PART II - Challenges for Governments

1. The inexistence of global dialogue and commitment with ODL at inter-ministerial, national, local and institutional levels, based on the identification of specific barriers (e.g. rigid enrolment processes, certification, ...), aiming to provide an agreed and coherent action at each level (e.g. curriculum, prior learning assessment,...).
2. The lack of ODL awareness and knowledge by policy makers and accreditation bodies for implementing and mainstreaming ODL accreditation.
3. The need to define the features in order to establish distance education.

4. The absence of regulation on the quality of MOOCs.
5. The insufficient knowledge and practice on ODL and the lack of digital literacy among faculty carry the following consequences: scarce integration of ICT in teaching practices; predominance of a technical usage instead of a pedagogical usage of ICT; unawareness of ODL challenges (e.g. OER, MOOCs).

PART III - Challenges for a Joint Agenda

1. The need to clarify and strengthen the role that associations can play in Governments, and to agree on how to approach governments and to demonstrate the added-value of the associations' unique background knowledge regarding ODL (e.g. student centred, inclusive pedagogy) to governmental action. It is important to consider the common issues that ODL institutions have regarding governments, and the possible solutions in order to cope with them.
2. The lack of support to policy makers and accreditation bodies to implement and mainstream ODL accreditation.
3. The lack of common understanding and definition of concepts and terminology related to ODL and DE, which compromise the communication between stakeholders.
4. The need to strengthen collaborative work between associations and to create a joint research agenda on key areas of ODL organisation, delivery and performance (operational models, pedagogical approaches, student readiness, enrolment and satisfaction, learning outcomes and achievements, best practices,...), supported by learning analytics.
5. The need of ODL holistic approaches that acknowledge HE profound changing scenario and consider:
 - a. the diversity of educational providers, outside and inside the Higher Education system (ODL and non ODL-Universities, emerging ODL providers...);
 - b. the need for networks and the promotion of dialogue amongst actors (top-management, researchers, teachers,...);
 - c. key areas for ODL implementation (legal framework, funding, pedagogical challenges, learners' diversity, teacher training, institutional practice, quality, certification).

6. The need to get organised in order to support new providers that lack ODL legacy (foundational concepts, ODL thinking, pedagogics, research), brought by the MOOC phenomena, rapid dissemination and social impact.
7. The lack of communication and connection with community stakeholders (e.g. use newspapers, do *pro bono* work), in order to raise their awareness and include them on ODL thinking.
8. The inexistence of an international localisation infrastructure for OER, based on agreed metadata (metadata database).
9. The distance between supply and demand concerning OER, with a great amount of similar OER still lacking improvements, sharing and effective use.

Recommendations

Part I - Recommendations for Institutions

Institutions should start conceptualising and acting upon Education on a macro level.

It is necessary to disseminate information about ODL in order to engage and motivate faculty, particularly, the ones that are not engaged but that are also not against it.

Institutions should be aware of the pros and cons of moving into MOOCs and be very transparent regarding projects and programmes. Transparency is relevant for the Institutions themselves, but also a key issue for the students when they have to make decisions about institutions and programmes.

Sharing the best pedagogical practices and educational resources through online and open repositories is significant, but it is still necessary to emphasise that the HEIs should use the existing OER and increase OEP within the institutions. OER should be organised locally, regionally and internationally, to avoid duplication and costs.

Teachers and researchers must get to know how to use OER repositories, which are often local solutions.

In a globalised world, institutions should be members of local, regional and international organisations. More than ever, it is imperative to know how to focus on questions that are important to the institution, along with the awareness that globalisation means “stress in competition” but also “internalisation induced by the spread about the quality of the best practices”.

MOOCs should be seen from different perspectives. As a business model, MOOCs can be used by HEIs to access other types of people. Institutions should focus on quality aspects; they should find objectives for the MOOC initiatives and they should continue to create, use and re-use OERs.

Part II - Recommendations for Governments

It is crucial that Governments become familiar with the different facets of ODL.

Higher Education Institutions and other organisations can and should assume the consulting role, mainly concerning the assurance of (methodological and pedagogical) courses’ quality and some “nonsense regulation”, mostly based on unawareness.

The sustainability and the funding of ODL is closely linked with its quality. Regional and over-regional associations can draw attention of Governments and Ministers to ODL and to the vision of being innovative and successful, which they should include in their agenda and policy in opening up for ODL.

ODL should be advocated and should become mainstream. There are many good examples of country policy strategies (e.g. Slovenia) and even continental strategies (e.g. Asia), where ODL leaders were included in national education forums.

Governments should recognise that there are different ways to provide education including ODL. They should assure the quality on institutional programs and promote teacher training focused on ODL, so that the value of ODL is recognised and its acceptance is improved.

Part III - Recommendations for research and a joint agenda

It is necessary to have a “communication platform and a strategy” with the governmental agencies. Associations and HEIs must clarify and simplify the communication around ODL, and make an effort concerning specific concepts and definitions within ODL. The lack of knowledge about the potential of ODL and the lack of transparency leads to a defensive attitude.

Research is a driver to support the action of ICDE and other organisations, being essential to evaluate the relation between input and output processes. Data mining, learning analytics and the production of monitoring tools are important emerging aspects. Research plays a role in understanding the economic impact of actions. The resulting evidence would help persuade political agents and, for that purpose, impact studies. Support on commonly agreed instruments and indicators are needed.

A database of the current research and current researchers could be created in order to prepare a research plan. ICDE would lead this repository-plan.

As the research field is highly competitive and selective, ICDE should find alternative ways to get involved with research and to be able to attract good researchers.

As most organisations are relatively small and there is a lot of knowledge that can be shared, the work should be better articulated together. For example, if data was shared on a regular basis, there could be an effort to create common surveys that could be used by several countries.

Research at a national level is crucial. It would help understanding issues such as quality on the students' perspective, in different countries or continents.

Research on learning processes (such as mobile learning) and pedagogical quality are examples of topics, which could be object of research by enrolling PhD students.

As far as results are concerned, there should be some collaboration efforts to set strategies for the application of the research results.

It is important that UNESCO addresses the need for the stabilisation of concepts and terminology.

Final considerations

The debate and the work done by experts are and will continue being fundamental pieces, but now the time for action has come, without ignoring what the research field has already completed. A special effort should be dedicated to the creation of a quality framework for ODL, particularly concerning how learning is happening in ODL settings, and what is the real impact of ODL in the market.

It's time to involve governments, communities and the market place as actors, and to take advantage of the unique background knowledge and experience that regional associations have in the ODL field.

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