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Digital Policy for Equity and Openness

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in an era of unprecedented challenges and transformations in all sub-sectors of education. The rapid spread of the virus necessitated immediate and decisive actions from governments and educational institutions globally, prompting a swift transition to emergency remote teaching and learning to ensure the safety of students, educators, and staff. This response marked a departure from conventional educational paradigms, thrusting the whole sector into a digital realm, which was new and disturbing to many. Beyond the pandemic, the role of remote and hybrid learning models continues to evolve, offering insights for a reimagined educational future. Indeed, it is arguable that the continuing emphasis on 'resilience' in education among policymakers reflects an understanding that a mode change is increasingly now the 'new normal' for much of the sector. The widespread increased experience of online learning provides a unique opportunity to enhance not only resilience but also flexibility and inclusivity, but given a chronic inequality in resources these will be very differently approached by nations to build upon that new normal. This paper examines the experiences of a selection of Commonwealth countries to support the building of a common framework of principles and policies that could make education systems more resilient, more open and more equitable.

Keywords

education policy, equity, resilience, open education, new normal

1 Introduction

During the recent global pandemic over 1.6 billion students across more than 190 countries were impacted by campus closures (UNESCO, 2022), where the shift to emergency online education emerged as both a critical challenge and an indispensable solution. This transition revealed substantial obstacles for educators, students, and families alike, while institutions were constrained by a lack of infrastructure, resources and policy instruments. Conventional classroom teachers were propelled into the digital landscape with minimal preparation, tasked with delivering quality education through virtual platforms. Students faced hurdles in accessing digital materials, maintaining engagement outside the structured environment of physical classrooms, and managing the blend of academic and personal life within their homes.

Despite these challenges, the widespread forced adoption of remote education has fostered innovation and adaptability. In general, many conventional educators rapidly advanced their digital skills, crafting more engaging and interactive online learning environments, while students have developed greater digital literacy and many came to appreciate more autonomy in their learning, benefiting from the flexibility to tailor their educational experiences to their pace.

The global pandemic underscored the global digital divide, exposing acute disparities in technology access for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and rural areas. This divide exacerbated existing educational inequalities, disadvantaging a significant portion of the student population in their access to online learning in both global North (e.g. Hampton, 2023) and global South contexts (e.g. Azubuike et al., 2022).

We now need policy to structure and incentivise this transition further.

2 From emergency remote teaching to quality open and distance learning

Quality Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has long been the preserve of the open learning systems of Open Universities and Open Schooling. Even for some of these, the pandemic posed challenges, since many of these institutions had in-person staff and physical resource distribution systems impacted by closures and restrictions (e.g. Hou, 2023). However, the core model of the open systems was already aligned to reach to learners outside of a classroom context, so of itself remained resilient under this challenge.

For conventional formal learning systems, beyond the pandemic, learning models continue to evolve, offering insights for a reimagined, more hybrid, educational future. The experience of compulsory online learning provides a unique opportunity to enhance education's resilience, flexibility, and inclusivity alongside the existing open learning systems. It is crucial to bridge the digital divide and address the challenges surfaced during the pandemic through collaborative efforts among governments, educational institutions, and stakeholders, aiming for an education system that is accessible and equitable for all students. This is one aspect of the increasing emphasis on resilience in education among policymakers. An example is the outcome statement of the Pacific Ministers of Education (April 2023, Auckland).

The abrupt global transition to online learning also highlighted a significant skills gap among educators in digital pedagogy. Despite their commitment and swift adaptation, many teachers found themselves in unfamiliar territory, often without adequate training or resources to effectively navigate digital platforms. This sudden shift underscored the disparities in digital literacy and pedagogical adaptability within the teaching workforce, spotlighting the need for

comprehensive professional development programmes to equip educators with the necessary skills for effective digital instruction and engagement in any learning environment.

The pandemic, while initially forcing a reactive shift to digital education, has now opened the door to a more deliberate and strategic approach to integrating digital and hybrid learning models. The ongoing transition from emergency remote teaching to established digital and hybrid formats has brought open and distance learning from the periphery to the core and necessitates a re-evaluation of educational practices. Institutions must consider the adoption of new policies that not only accommodate but also prioritise digital and hybrid learning modalities as core components of the educational framework. This includes redefining curricula, assessment methods, and student support services to align with the demands of a digitally connected paradigm of education and training.

Moreover, the need for new institutional ODL policies to embed digital and hybrid learning into the mainstream is paramount. Such policies should aim to standardise online and blended learning practices, ensuring high-quality educational delivery across all formats. They must address the provision of necessary technological resources to both students and educators, promote digital literacy, and support the development of engaging and accessible online content. Adequate provisions must be made in policies to address inadequate access to connectivity infrastructure. Furthermore, policies should facilitate ongoing professional development for educators, enabling them to harness the full potential of digital tools in enhancing student learning experiences. With advances in generative AI, especially with open-source LLM's, use of cloudlets in academic computing, blockchain or equivalent registers that are sovereign-guaranteed and advances in open-source XR, it should be possible to craft policies and procedures to assure quality for all stakeholders in education and training. Exploiting the openness inherent in digital technology with meaningful 'open' distance learning policies will be the way forward to assure quality in online and hybrid education.

3 The role of policy in supporting open and distance learning

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) believed, and still believes, that collaboration and sharing are the only way to help tide over the adverse impacts of the economic, social and health challenges that were faced in consequence of the pandemic. COL therefore extended an invitation to the open system institutions to join this effort through an 'Open Door' partnership initiative (COL, n.d.). Contributing partners included: open/ virtual/ eUniversities, dual mode institutions, open schools/ polytechnics, national, regional, and international ODL associations, foundations and non-profit providers, technology providers, and inter-governmental organisations supporting technology in education. This partnership approach was, and is, based on shared values of mutual respect, equity and inclusion as well as a commitment to respond to the needs of stakeholders with open access to pooled resources, shared expertise, and online training through the common gateway. Looking ahead, it was argued that governments should build resilience into their education systems for the longer term by, among other things, putting ODL arrangements in place and supporting teachers better to cope with crises such as disruptions of campus-based provision (Kanwar & Daniel, 2020).

In response to the closure of campuses during the pandemic, most Ministries looked to their teachers to find ways to ensure continuity of learning using various online tools. However, many teachers were conditioned by both training and experience to equate quality teaching with in-person instruction and were not well prepared to move into the online space. It was therefore necessary to offer online training to help teachers with emergency remote teaching, in one country reaching almost 40% of the teaching force (Mays et al., 2021). As noted in the related

study, the initial request for such training was received from the Ministry of Education in Fiji but was then subsequently taken up at scale by the Ministry of Education in Trinidad and Tobago.

Although some institutions were able to pivot quickly towards online provision during the pandemic (Daniel, 2000), in other contexts, responses were less nimble for a variety of reasons, including the readiness of leadership for such change (Makoe & Olcott, 2021) as well as systemic challenges related to issues such as access, the time needed to respond, variable available support from key stakeholders and role-players, varied interpretations of education quality and whether or not there existed a shared vision for the future post pandemic (Jordan, 2020).

As noted previously, many institutions resorted to emergency remote teaching to try to ensure continuity of learning during the pandemic. Now with the pandemic behind us, many tertiary institutions have returned to their traditional, fully face-to-face modality, but a number have retained a hybrid model offering fully online provision to some, with blended or hybrid provision to others. In higher education the increase of online, blended and hybrid forms of provision are seen by some as critical for the very “survival” of higher education provision (Bozkurt, 2022). Schooling provision has in large part returned to the bricks and mortar model, although there are conversations about the possibility for expanded open online schooling (COL, 2020; Jha & Ghatak, 2023). Others argue that one of the silver linings of the pandemic is that it put the spotlight back on the central importance of learner engagement regardless of mode of provision (Naidu, 2023). We also need to move from the notion of ‘pivoting’ towards online provision to taking a more considered and structured approach (Lockee, 2023) which perhaps embraces a more critical pedagogy that is more culturally inclusive (Köseoğlu et al., 2023) – it is not just about what we teach but also how we teach it. This implies the need for guiding policy frameworks that build upon lessons learned, and being learned, but which are future-directed and emphasise appropriate investment in technology and in building capacity in the appropriate use thereof (Machmud et al., 2021; Mishra & Panda, 2020; Stewart & Lowenthal, 2023).

However, policy development, ratification, implementation and review at a national level can be a slow process and may often be delayed for many years for various internal reasons (Bowman, 2023).

This may explain the relative dearth of ODL policy at the national level (Mays et al., 2021). The issue is further complicated because national policy might be the province of different Ministries. For example, in South Africa, the national ODL policy was developed under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education and applies only to Higher Education provision. In other countries, there may need to be a separate policy for the basic education level, as is the case with COL’s recent work in The Gambia in relation to Open Schooling (COL, 2023a). Moreover, national strategies will likely need further nuancing to create appropriate policy frameworks for sub-constituencies such as teachers (COL, 2023b). This may further lengthen the process from policy development to policy implementation.

In developing and reviewing a national or institutional policy, however, some key questions seem obvious to ask:

- Why is it necessary? Addressing issues of context, rationale and purpose.
- To what does it apply? Addressing issues of definition and scope.
- To whom does it apply? Addressing issues of public and/or private provision as well as levels of application — schooling, adult education, technical and vocational education and training, and/or higher education.
- Where does it apply? Addressing implications for physical and ICT infrastructure, access, costing and security as well as cross-border provision in an online era.

- When does it apply? Addressing issues of policy implementation and renewal.
- How does it apply? Addressing issues of coordination, monitoring, quality assurance, review and funding. (Mays, 2020, p. 185)

These questions in turn suggest some key ODL policy development and review parameters:

Table 1: ODL policy development and review parameters (updated from Mays, 2020, pp. 185-6)

Issue	Suggested key questions
Definition	How does the policy understand ODL in relation to, for example, distance education, online provision, and flexible/mixed mode/hybrid provision?
Scope	What is the scope of the policy – e.g., does it include open schooling; adult education and training; technical, vocational and skills development; higher education, etc.?
Rationale	Why is the policy needed?
Purpose	What does the policy seek to achieve?
Context	How does the policy relate to contextual needs, including other policies, – e.g., information and communication technology, human resource management, quality assurance, intellectual property rights, and education strategy and policy generally?
Principles/values	What principles or values are considered non-negotiable?
Policy influences	What national, regional or global issues have influenced the policy provisions?
Cross-border provision	What is the policy provision on cross-border provision (both incoming and outgoing)?
System	What systemic conditions have shaped the policy provisions? What systemic issues need to be addressed for the policy to be effective?
Planning and monitoring	How does the policy fit into system planning, coordinating and monitoring? How should information feed the education management information system?
Public/private	What is the policy position regarding the respective roles of public and private providers?
ICT	What is the envisaged role of ICT in ODL provision? How will government support increased access, lower costs and improved reach? How should policy guide engagement with new technologies?
Institutions/QA	Which institutions can offer ODL? What is the policy position on single, dual and mixed mode/flexible provision?

	How are institutions registered for ODL provision?
	What are policy expectations regarding regional collaboration, ICT, and library/ e-library infrastructure?
	What are policy expectations regarding student enrolment, and authentication/verification of student identity and work submitted?
	What are general policy expectations regarding staff qualifications, experience, training, support and workload?
Collaboration/QA	What are policy expectations regarding collaboration in areas such as co-developed programmes and materials and shared facilities?
	What is the policy position regarding public/private partnerships?
Programmes/QA	What are policy expectations with respect to ODL programme design, student support, assessment and evaluation?
	How are ODL programmes approved, accredited and registered?
	What are policy expectations regarding recognition of prior learning, continuous assessment (including badges, micro-credentials and blockchain technology), practical work, work integrated learning...?
IPR/OER	What is the policy position on intellectual property rights in publicly funded institutions?
	Does policy support OER? If so, how?
Funding	What funding mechanisms are supported by policy – for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• institutional grants (how and when? types?)• fees (determined by institutions or the state?)• third-stream income/cross-subsidisation?• student bursaries and loan schemes?• private provider fidelity fund/asset-debt ratios?
Research	What is the policy position on research related to ODL provision?
	How can policy help ensure continuous improvement through evidence-based decision making?

So, we know what kinds of questions we need to ask and answer, but within what framework/s should we embark on such discussions? In this paper, we argue for two major departure points:

- an underpinning concern for equity,
- an underpinning belief in openness.

4 ODL digital policy to enhance Equity

The pandemic touched almost everyone's life on earth and influenced how we view the world in more than one way. The education systems and processes are among those that faced major

challenges across the world and digital started playing a central role with varying degree of success and failure. This brought the mainstream or traditional education systems, ODL-based education systems, closer. In the post pandemic world, both school and tertiary education sectors, including higher education, have been mindful of these changes but not necessarily fully prepared and responsive towards building a more reliant system that is inclusive, quality-driven and prepared to respond with greater rigour to any such occurrence in future. This calls for a considered assessment of both the 'existing' as well as the 'new' systems and developing a set of principles that could guide policies as well as institutional processes for the education sector, learning from both ODL and traditional systems while also being mindful of the prevalent limitations of both.

Given that there is a huge inequality in terms of resources – financial, technical, and human, there is bound to be diversity and inequality in terms of responses as well. An exploration of selected experiences across a few countries reveals that policies, both at the level of governance and the institution, play a significant role in either enabling or constraining change. It is necessary to examine these Covid and post-Covid experiences in the light of prevalent and emerging policies and institutional processes in selected countries to cull out a few pointers towards building a framework of principles and policies that could make education systems more resilient.

The following paragraphs focus on equity issues that have emerged or have often been raised in the context of open education, especially with reference to ODL as practiced in many developing countries, and also the use of online learning during the pandemic phase. It is important to add here that the equity concerns are also critical for quality; equity and quality are not part of an either-or conundrum.

4.1 The equity concerns

A perusal of equity issues as emerging in different forms of literature shows a concentration around the following dimensions of equity and their repercussions for learning as well as for the policy:

- Use of technology in open education (in general and not limited to but inclusive of the pandemic phase) and associated issues of digital divide and exclusion.
- Online teaching and other forms of distance education (TV based classes, radio, print) and issues of learner motivation, relationships (e.g., teacher-learner/ learner-learner), distances (especially transactional distance) and pedagogies.
- The use of open education for the 'marginalised' itself as an indicator of ODL being 'low-cost' and therefore interpreted as the 'low-quality' option for the poor and deprived.
- Reproduction of all forms of biases related to marginalisation (race, class, gender, etc.) in open education.

Despite some overlaps in some respects here and there, these four dimensions are quite distinct from each other, and present different kinds of challenges both for the open systems, and for the related policy responses. Also, while discussing the context of open education, it becomes important to remember two critical points: (i) fundamental principles of 'good' education remain the same whether delivered through an open system or through conventional systems, and (ii) as in the case of delivery through the conventional systems of education, the delivery through open systems is also diverse across geographies for a number of reasons including resources, policies, cultures and systems. However, before discussing these points in detail, let us examine the four kinds of equity concerns that have been raised in the context of open education.

4.2 Access, digital divide, and exclusion

One of the major limitations that came to the surface when online / technology assisted teaching-learning became widespread suddenly during the pandemic was that of access. What emerged is that the data on households having a mobile phone or even a smart phone is not reflective of the real accessibility to use the device and connection for all in the household. Similarly, the mobile connectivity data for a geographical area is not reflective of the presence of unhindered connectivity for all residing in the area. For instance, a four-country study conducted in Ethiopia, India, Nigeria and Pakistan in late 2020 indicted that 40% of school-age children were not engaging with any kind of learning activity at home, such as studying offline or using TV or radio for distance learning, despite the provisions for such education these being present in some form or the other in these countries (Akmal et al., 2020). Several studies in India, which houses the largest number of school-going children in the world, indicated that not more than 10-30% of school-age children had any kind of access to devices that could allow the access to online portals or classes or resources, the actual percentage being able to use it being much less for these (Ghatak et al., 2020; Raut & Huy, 2022).

Issues linked with poverty, linguistic diversity and gender further limited this access. Structural issues associated with prevalent social norms related to women's care work and value of education create intra-household differentiations leading to time-poverty as well as limiting their access to devices in many countries (Akmal et al., 2020; Gaved, 2022). The examples of poverty intersecting with other forms of marginalisation to make the required internet packages unaffordable for learners at both school or university levels have also been documented (Hossain, 2021; Gaved, 2022; Jha & Ghatak, 2023; Zamir & Wang, 2023).

What is important to add here is that while these got studied and reported during the pandemic, none of these are specific to the pandemic. The pandemic merely brought these issues of marginalisation to the fore. Any form of open education dependent on these technologies needs to be aware of and responsive to these constraints. The literature also is full of examples where innovative combinations of local in-person support either in educational institutions or community-based institutions have been successful in promoting better learning opportunities by using open resources using diverse technologies in under-resourced contexts (Mukoyi et al., 2021; Gaved, 2022). It was obvious that countries with better policies and institutional networks were better prepared to respond and use open education even during the pandemic. Closely connected with the issue of access is the aspect of relationships, pedagogies and learner motivation in open education, as these are also dependent on the nature and forms of access that learners have.

4.3 Relationships, pedagogies, and learner motivation

One common critique of ODL-based education is that these modes prevent enabling teacher – student relationships or peer relationships, the human factor, to form and contribute to learning (Baum & McPherson, 2019). Transactional distance, a psychological and communication space between what is taught by the teacher and what the learner perceives and understands (Moore, 1997), has often been raised as an issue in ODL-based education at all levels leading to low motivation of learners. Low completion rates experienced in MOOC-based courses are often attributed to low learner motivation and absence of a support network that is supposed to be present in physical classroom and campuses. An important aspect of this gets manifested in the absence of discursive and interactive pedagogies, leading to 'learnification' of education and 'responsibilizing' of individual learners who are supposed to and are made responsible for managing their own learning (Decuyper, 2018). In the context of sciences, the absence of

laboratory experiences is identified as a major gap in addition to other dimensions discussed above (Babu & Ramaswamy, 2021).

These discussions, though valuable and well-evidenced, are premised on two assumptions, especially when viewed in a comparative frame: (i) physical proximity is necessary for interactive and discursive pedagogy, and (ii) physical proximity guarantees that the pedagogy is interactive and discursive. Neither is universally true. Abundant evidence exists to show that physical classrooms continue to be teacher-centric at all stages of education in many developing countries and despite the rhetoric of learner-centricity, this has been one of the most difficult changes that the education systems have been trying to bring (Shah, 2020). Further, although with some limitations, technological advances and creative communication channels have made it possible to introduce elements of lively interactions and discussions in open classrooms, but it depends on the specific system and teachers and how they use it. New literature is also emerging around ways of addressing the issue of care and relationship in distance education or online teaching, especially from practising teachers themselves, and is showing pointers towards the policy shifts that would enable such responsive education systems to emerge and take roots. For instance, arguments towards the need for developing an approach borrowing from positive psychology for proactive motivational support to learners have been made from among ODL practitioners while faculties from traditional universities engaged in online teaching are making a case for developing an 'ethics of care', which is based on trust rather than guided by surveillance (Tomsons, 2022). Therefore, what emerges is that while no one can question the need for interactive and discursive classrooms, both open and conventional systems face challenges in this regard.

The autonomy and flexibility that an open system of education can offer in terms of a wide variety of courses and resources to choose from, and the flexibility with respect to time and space for participating in and completing the courses, can be truly empowering in a resource-rich environment, especially for adult learners and more so if it is coupled with a responsive support system. However, earlier discussions on access and exclusion make it clear that this imagined autonomy of the learner is premised on the presence of several other contextual, policy and structural factors, which can together be termed as pre-requisites or thresholds (Jha & Ghatak, 2023) that allow the open system to succeed. These thresholds are indeed far from universal in the present world, as the education systems are highly stratified and uneven in terms of resources and reach. The following section delves deeper into this issue of stratification present in the education systems.

4.4 Low-cost and low-quality option for the poor and marginalised

Another common critique of the open system and related policies has been that the governments are promoting ODL education for the poor whereas the rich and privileged continue to access conventional education as well as the better of what is available through online channels as well. Implicit in this critique is also the argument that ODL-based education is of poor quality while conventional education is better resourced and therefore better quality. The problem is that the two systems run parallel to each other in most countries and often ODL-based education is promoted as the means to reach the 'last mile' and therefore the most marginalised who have not accessed education thus far, this being true especially for developing countries. This implies that open systems operating in such circumstances should be especially geared to address the specific needs of their learners and invest in developing the mechanisms that enrich their learning experiences.

Those accessing the conventional education system, by virtue of being better resourced, as well as the fact that most of them come from relatively privileged backgrounds, get access not only to

the better-resourced conventional system but also the best of openly available additional resources. In contrast, the majority of those accessing open systems come from relatively deprived contexts and therefore need more responsive education strategies but often do not have the wherewithal to access everything that the open systems have to offer (Decuyper, 2019). This leads to an anomalous situation that is partially responsible for this critique, and which is more representative of the stratified systems that exist rather than of the concept of an open system of education per se. Nevertheless, the fact remains that education policies do not necessarily address this anomaly, leading to this situation and the critique. It is also not about the policy alone; the wider political economy also plays a role in maintaining this situation.

4.5 Reproduction of biases

The issues relating to reproduction of biases cut across aspects of access, delivery, pedagogy, social norms, etc. In terms of access, the traditional ODL-based education has been critiqued for encouraging women's confinement to home, as it allows them to study without stepping out, and conforms to mobility-related restrictive gender norms prevalent in certain societies. We have already discussed the intra-household differentiations faced by girls in accessing the technological devices that would allow them to access learning.

In addition, new literature is emerging about how technology, which is an important tool in open education, itself is reproducing the already-existent biases associated with gender, race, and ethnicity (Eickers & Rath, 2021; Fellows & Smith, 2022). Going beyond the issue of digital divide, new concepts such as 'adverse digital incorporation' are being developed to highlight 'how inequalities are being created for groups that are included in the digital system' (Heeks, 2022). This critique has far more universal ramification than those linked with access, and thus applicable to both global North and South. However, this critique is also not specific to open systems alone, as the use of technology is deeply penetrated in the conventional system as well, more so in the global North as compared to the global South.

4.6 Policy Implications of the Equity Concerns

An important message emanating from the pandemic was that it is time to collapse the sharp divide that the conventional system and open system of education have been operating across so far. It is important to realise that the use of 'open' is no more confined to open systems of education alone, and while conventional systems need to reform their institutional structures, processes and mechanisms to accommodate open systems, the already open systems also need to learn from their experiences and reform their institutional structures, processes and mechanisms to be able to enhance the quality and address issues of inclusiveness, both for enhancing access and to promote interactive pedagogies and discursive learning experiences. This cannot happen without shifts in respective policies at various levels. Currently, in most countries, the policies and associated norms are very different for conventional and open systems, and largely remain non-cognizant of the shifts that have taken place in open approaches and their delivery, with implications for both the systems – this needs to change (Zhao & Watterson, 2021). The policies need to consider the precursors and thresholds that have to be considered for establishing an enabling environment for open systems to flourish and be successful, either on their own or through the means of blended approaches in conventional systems.

5 ODL digital policy to enhance openness

The notion of openness in education provision, especially at higher levels, came to the fore with the advent of the UK Open University and its commitment to being open to people, places, methods and ideas (Daniel et al., 2022).

Bates (2015) observes that the notion of open education may take several forms:

- *education for all*: free or very low-cost school, college or university education available to everyone within a particular jurisdiction, usually funded primarily through the state;
- *open access to programmes that lead to full, recognised qualifications*. These may be offered by national open universities or more recently by the OER [or by open schools];
- *open access to courses or programmes that are not for formal credit*, although it may be possible to acquire badges or certificates for successful completion. MOOCs are a good example;
- *open educational resources* that instructors or learners can use for free. MIT's Open Courseware, which provides free online downloads of MIT's video recorded lectures and support material, is one example;
- *open textbooks*, online textbooks that are free for students to use;
- *open research*, whereby research papers are made available online for free downloading;
- *open data*, that is, data open to anyone to use, reuse, and redistribute, subject only, at most, to the requirement to attribute and share.

And the notion of "open" continues to evolve:

- Open as in access for all: Sustainable inclusive learning with universal and flexible access to quality school education and skill development (NIOS, 2012)
- Open as in connected and permeable (Sotiriou & Cherouvis, 2017).
- Open as in offering bespoke curricula (Open School BC, n.d.)
- Open access publishing (Costello et al. 2019)
- Open as in integrating other ways of knowing such as indigenous knowledge (Adeyeye, 2019).

Research in the pre-pandemic period has noted that most so-called massive "open" online courses (MOOCs) are not in fact "open" in the ways originally envisaged (Chiappe-Laverde et al., 2015), nor indeed do they alone bridge the socioeconomic advantage gap created by selective education (Hansen & Reich, 2015). There is therefore a need to realign theory and practice. During the pandemic, COL embraced MOOC technology extensively to continue to support partner staff capacity-building. However, all course content was made available for revision and re-use by others either by accessing the course content from COL's Open Access repository or via the course site itself (as is the case with COL's Pacific Open Courses, for example). Post-pandemic, COL has shifted its focus from being a provider of such courses to helping its partners revise COL's courses for their own context or to develop their own courses using a variety of online platforms, including those with potential to reach large numbers. This is reflective of a possible new trend, which Naidu (2020) refers to as MOOC 2.0, in which providers of MOOCs recover the open aspects of the original concept.

The increased access to generative AI support tools has further influenced the permeability of traditional course provision, resulting in greater openness in terms of sources and resources, and COL has experimented with the use of such tools to support students and teachers both with

platform- and content-related queries. As Rienties et al. (2024, p. 2) observe, reflecting on the recent use of such tools at the UK Open University:

[Students] agreed on the usefulness of such an AI tool while studying and reported benefits from using it for real-time assistance and query resolution, support for academic tasks, personalization and accessibility, together with emotional and social support. Students concerns related to the ethical and social implications of implementing AIDA, data privacy and data use, operational challenges, academic integrity and misuse, and the future of education.

So, ODL policy needs to seek to enhance the opportunities for greater openness while mitigating the risks.

Cronin and Czerniewicz (2024) suggest that open education is at a crossroads and that there is need to “grow a global alliance of open education networks” (p. 17) to ensure that we continue to address the imperatives of equity and social justice.

6 Conclusion

The closure of campuses during the pandemic accelerated an already-existent trend towards greater use of digital and technology-enabled learning approaches. However, it also sharply highlighted the digital divide in terms of both technology access and skills.

On reflection, it now seems clear that digitisation of the curriculum, and expanded use of both OER and ODL, in both blended and online modes, will be key to institutional and national resilience. However, there is now a need to develop and implement the policies which will guide future practice in ways that enhance equity and reclaim the open in ODL.

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