Oral histories and engaged perspectives: In conversation with Asha Kanwar

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Abstract

This interview with Professor Asha Kanwar, former President of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and a pioneering advocate of open and distance education, explores her extensive contributions to the field and provides critical insights into the evolution of open universities. Tracing her career trajectory from the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) to her presidency at COL, Professor Kanwar reflects on the transformative role of open, distance, and digital education (ODDE) in promoting equitable access to education globally. She addresses contemporary challenges in higher education and the pivotal role of ODDE in the context of global crises, such as armed conflicts, climate-induced displacement, and the COVID-19 pandemic. She discusses the practical strategies implemented to support learners in disrupted environments. As a female leader in a traditionally male-dominated space, Professor Kanwar offers a nuanced perspective on gender and leadership within the academic community. This interview contributes to the scholarly discourse by documenting her vision and strategic interventions in advancing the global ODDE agenda.

Keywords

distance learning, Commonwealth of Learning, UNESCO, technologies, women, open education, open universities, sustainability, ODDE

Kathryn R. Johnson (KJ):

Today is June 25, 2024. My name is Kathryn Johnson, and I'm in Michigan, USA. Berrin Cefa is in Oldenburg, Germany. Professor Asha Kanwar is joining us from Beijing, China.

Asha, you worked at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) during the early years of that institution. What was your role there? What kinds of social and administrative challenges did you encounter?

Asha Kanwar (AK):

Thank you for this question which allows me to recall that we moved at such a fast pace. When IGNOU started in 1985, I had just come back after completing my doctoral studies at the University of Sussex. I was applying for jobs and was successful in getting two offers from campus institutions in Pune and Delhi.

However, I chose IGNOU even though most people were skeptical about where it was headed, and weren't sure that distance education would go very far. I decided to join IGNOU as a Reader or Associate Professor. The opportunity to teach a large class combined with everything I had heard and seen about the Open University in the UK led me to this decision. As a new institution, IGNOU was expanding very fast and I was fortunate to have several roles. From Reader, I became a full Professor, then Director of the School of Humanities, and the Pro Vice Chancellor of the university.

Those early years were very interesting. We were operating out of rented apartments and houses in South Delhi. They were disconnected and all over the place. But people had a sense of collegiality, bonhomie, excitement, and were often working till 11 o'clock at night because a course module had to be completed before being sent to the press. It was a very good atmosphere, and even though there wasn't a university building, people took ownership of what they were doing and the new institution.

It was primarily print-based distance education, but we had audios, videos, and radio and television broadcasts. Because we came from other campus-based universities, IGNOU organized three-week rigorous training programs in distance learning. We learned about the principles of distance education as well as how to write self-instructional materials, develop scripts, and present audio and video programs. That initial training was very useful, because today if anybody at half-a-minute's notice says come in front of the camera, I have no hesitation in doing that, thanks to IGNOU.

It's come a long way since those early days. IGNOU offers multimodal and online programs, but I think the kind of constituency that they're trying to reach - the last person in the queue - the people in villages, remote areas still lack access to the internet. Those constituencies are still reached mainly through print medium and blended approaches, even though a lot of them have smartphones now.

The first cohort was about 3,000 students. Now there are over 3 million cumulative enrollments at IGNOU. It grew so quickly, especially in the initial days. IGNOU offered various programs to incarcerated people and special programs for women. It generated a lot of excitement. Because the study materials were being sent by post, there were regular dispatch problems because of the large numbers. We had a very active task force to sort out those issues. Managing the large volume of assignments and providing feedback was an early challenge, which today we don't have because of technology. We can send materials online and respond to people with intelligent technologies and tutoring systems. But because of the uneven access to technologies, I'm glad that IGNOU is still catering to a diverse range of people who wouldn't really have the opportunities for tertiary education.

Professor G. Ram Reddy[1], the first Vice Chancellor of IGNOU, was an institution builder and believed in social justice. He is the father of open and distance learning in India. When he went to the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) after completing his term at IGNOU, he brought his passion and conviction about the benefits of distance learning to the wider Commonwealth.

KJ:

Open universities have often depended on regional and national support, as was the case in India. Given your experience collaborating with high-level political leaders across the Commonwealth, how has the political support evolved over time? What impact have neoliberal policies had on the continuity or disruption of education as a public good?

AK:

In the past few decades in the Global North, we can see a trend for dedicated single-mode open universities to either merge with campus institutions or become dual-mode. In Canada, the British Columbia Open University merged with a college to become Thompson Rivers University[2]. Similarly, the Open University of Hong Kong is now a dual-mode institution, the Hong Kong Metropolitan University, with the majority of students on campus.

In the Global South, open universities continue to grow. There were 34 open universities in the Commonwealth, catering to 5 million students annually. There will be a 35th university, the Open University of Tripura[3] in India. The country will have 19 open universities, which are single-mode open universities—developed by the national and state governments. Look at it this way: if they didn't have those open universities, where would the millions go for higher education? They are more affordable and flexible.

In Africa, I went to the UNESCO office in Dakar from 2002 to 2003. This was a joint UNESCO-COL position initiated by the then President of COL, Tan Sri Raj Dhanarajan, who wanted to reach the last person in the queue. It was very interesting that, some 20 years ago, there was a huge emphasis on using distance learning for teacher training in Sub-Saharan Africa. The UNESCO office was trying to get the Education Ministers on board. I remember having a Memorandum of Understanding signed by five Education Ministers of West Africa committing to adopt distance education for teacher training. Political will and commitment are very important but even more important is action needed to address the issue of teacher deficit and teacher quality in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Two of the big sections of UNESCO are the education sector and the communication and information technology sector. When I was in the Dakar office, those Education and Communication and Information sectors at UNESCO headquarters were headed by Sir John

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[1] Dr. G. Ram Reddy served as Vice-Chancellor of Andhra Pradesh Open University from 1982-1985. It was the first open university in India. He became Vice-Chancellor of IGNOU when it was created in 1985. For more on those institutions, see: Mugridge, I. (Ed.). (1997). *Founding the open universities: Essays in memory of G. Ram Reddy*. Sterling Publishers.

[2] The Open Learning Agency of British Columbia administered the BC Open University (BCOU). The BCOU courses became part of the Open Learning Division of Thompson Rivers University in 2005.

[3] This legislation passed in January 2024 to establish a self-financed private open university. For more information see: Mata Tripurasundari Open University Bill passed in the Assembly ignoring the demands of the opposition. (2024, September 8). *TripuraInfo*. https://tripurainfo.com/news.aspx?intnid=19387&title=Mata-Tripurasundari-Open-University-Bill-passed-in-the-Assembly-ignoring-the-demands-of-the-opposition

Daniel[4], who was my future boss and predecessor at COL and Professor Abdul Khan[5], who was my former boss as the Vice Chancellor of IGNOU. Both the Assistant Director Generals had been Vice Chancellors of open universities and their presence in such senior and influential positions at UNESCO headquarters was a huge boost for distance learning, not just in Africa, but globally.

There is a lot of momentum for building capacity in distance learning in Africa and the number of open universities is growing. In fact, the Open University of Kenya is the most recent one, established last year, with very strong support from the government. This online university has already enrolled its first cohort of students for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. The expectation is that 30% of all enrollments in higher education in the country will be at the Open University of Kenya.

In the Global South, there is a huge push towards open universities. Many open universities and schools stayed open during the pandemic. But at the same time, there's this constant battle in trying to combat the lingering perceptions of second-rate quality that persists in many countries even today. On the other hand, in a country like Mauritius, the Open University has overtaken the National University of Mauritius in terms of student numbers. It's a mixed picture.

Regarding neoliberal policies, the demand continues to grow. For example, in 2021, there were about 220 million students in higher education. By 2030 this will grow by another 160 million to 380 million[6]. Where will all these people go? It's not going to be possible to accommodate everybody in brick and mortar institutions. There will be a huge need for online and distance learning going forward. Also, public institutions may not be able to meet the demand due to capacity limitations, which is where the private sector has emerged as a major player. Wherever they find a vacuum, they are quick to fill it.

In Sub-Saharan Africa between 1990 and 2015 private universities grew from 30 to 1,000. In countries like Mozambique, the private universities are far greater in number than public universities. They have their finger on the pulse of what the learner wants and what the market wants. For example, a short course like *Grow with Google*, a six-month certificate, is very popular as it helps learners to apply for jobs with Google or similar employers.

Because of neoliberal policies, we're also seeing a shift from sole reliance on regulatory bodies and formal qualifications to shorter certificates which are market and employability oriented. These appeal to Generation Z. Different generations have different learning preferences, so we are moving in the direction of a much shorter attention span and different kinds of technologies that the younger learners prefer. The market is recognizing these shorter courses and qualifications, even if regulatory authorities do not. Open universities must keep these trends in mind.

To stay ahead of the curve, open universities should recognize a shift in the way people learn, a shift in what the market wants, and a shift in what kind of courses we have to offer and what kind of qualifications are needed. There is an increasing push toward micro-credentials. For

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[4] Sir John Daniel was the Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO from 2001 to 2004. He became the President and CEO of the Commonwealth of Learning in 2004. For more information see: https://sirjohn.ca/bio/

[5] Professor Abdul Khan was the Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information at UNESCO from 2001 to 2010. For more information see: https://awlf.or.jp/en/connect-with-asia-women/dr-abdul-waheed-khan-en/

[6] Murthi, M. & Malee Basset, R. (2022, November 15). Higher education: Understanding demand and redefining values. *World Bank Blogs*. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/education/higher-education-understanding-demand-and-redefining-values

example, one out of four graduates in the Philippines has already earned one or more micro-credentials for future job readiness.

Berrin Cefa (BC):

Do you think the shift towards neoliberal, market-driven approaches, along with the rise of micro-credentials, signals a core change in the consensus on the university's role? What are your thoughts on this shift in the university's position?

AK:

We've always regarded higher education as a public good driven by societal needs rather than by market forces alone. UNESCO calls for 'a new social contract' for education—one that is based on the interdependence and the connectedness of the people and the planet and will lead to a fairer, more sustainable future. In the dangerous and disruptive world we live in today, we need to look at justice and fairness for social cohesion. Higher education has a role beyond the market forces, and universities cannot continue with 'business as usual'. The private sector is leapfrogging into future market demands. How do we create a balance where we ensure that the idea of the university isn't completely held to ransom by market forces and that we still continue to provide the social and ethical glue that holds societies and communities together?

KJ:

The Commonwealth of Learning has been pivotal in offering MOOCs to support lifelong learning aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). How did this begin?

AK:

Before the pandemic, COL partnered with Athabasca University[7] and other institutions to offer MOOCs for teacher training at scale. But during the pandemic, COL started offering MOOCs directly using our own platform because we had expertise in two areas which are fundamental to MOOCs. One was the design and delivery of open and distance learning and the development and use of open educational resources (OER). The COL model was based on the needs of the Global South—the provision of a platform and course content that was OER that could be used or reused by partners or anyone so inclined.

The second was the capacity development dimension. For example, the Open University of Nigeria offered a MOOC[8] with COL support by training their staff on how to offer MOOCs. COL offered the resources and quality content, that could be tailored and localized according to institutional needs. It was a holistic approach that included the platform, the content and the capacity to offer MOOCs. In fact, the platform MOOC for Development, had an interface with basic audio phones to reach farmers and people in grassroots communities with audio content in the local languages.

COL not only offered MOOCs, building on its expertise in open and distance learning and OER, but it also influenced technology development, which would work for the most remote and marginalized communities.

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[7] From 2017 to 2024, the Commonwealth of Learning and Athabasca University partnered on the following MOOCs: *Technology Enabled Learning* offered 10 times, *Blended Learning Practice* offered nine times, *Leading Change in Teaching and Learning for a Digital World* offered three times, and *Designing for communities of Inquiry in Online Courses* offered twice. Collectively, there were 36,188 enrollees. See the Commonwealth of Learning's open access repository, OASIS, for a report on each MOOC. https://oasis.col.org/home

[8] This *History and Philosophy of Science* MOOC ran from June-August 2016. See: https://www.col.org/news/national-open-university-of-nigerias-first-mooc-meets-with-success/

The technologies were demystified and made compatible with MOOC for Development which was shared with partners, so they don't have to pay for it, to build the capacity, and share the resources as OER. All this worked very well, especially during the pandemic. Large numbers were trained because teachers wanted quality digital resources and the ability to integrate technology effectively into teaching and learning.

KJ:

How would you assess the value and the impact of that program in today's context of global disruptions, such as wars, refugee crises, and global warming?

AK:

These courses have had a real impact on people in difficult circumstances. For example, we did a training program for teachers about educating for climate action. Thousands of teachers benefitted from that MOOC. And one interesting thing is that when we offered a MOOC on climate change in the Pacific with UNESCO, the maximum number of enrollments were from the Pacific region. When the Nigerians offered a MOOC, the maximum number of participants were from Africa. MOOCs seem to assume a regional identity based on the particular institution that offers them.

Open and distance learning can be a viable option during wars or displacements. COL ran a program for 25 years called eLIO, e-Learning for International Organizations. The World Bank, the Red Cross, and other international organizations commissioned COL to offer e-learning programs for staff development to people in the field. These courses were offered to students in Syria, Lebanon, and international staff in difficult circumstances. Because there were a fairly sizable number of learners in these war-torn regions, we instituted an award for e-learning in difficult circumstances and the learners were recognized at the Pan Commonwealth Forums. COL's open schooling program with educational television brought education to children at the Dadaab refugee complex in Kenya. When the Ebola crisis happened, COL shared its distance learning materials for open schooling with the UNICEF office in Sierra Leone, so that that content could be made available to children when the schools had to be closed.

Even in natural disasters, open and distance learning has proved to be effective. I remember that the Minister of Education from Tonga said, 'You must help me. My schools are devastated because of the cyclone. The roofs are flown off. The books have all vanished. And there's nothing we can do. There's knee-deep water in all the school buildings.' We curated OER for secondary schools on a small device called *Aptus*, which COL had put together. It's a small server with a wireless router and a solar charger that can carry a lot of content-- Khan Academy[9] materials, videos, audios, etc. But it was not enough to provide the devices loaded with content. One of our colleagues went to Tonga to train technical staff in maintenance and repair and to train teachers on how to develop and upload their own content, and use the OER created by others. Distance learning has worked well in all kinds of crisis, as you can see.

In fact, one of the major contributions that COL has made over the years has been to expand the remit of open and distance learning beyond the formal education sector and to deploy it as an effective and viable model for promoting sustainable development.

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[9] Khan Academy is a non-profit organization that offers k-12 online study resources in several languages. https://www.khanacademy.org/

BC:

What are the intersections of ODDE and environmental sustainability?

AK:

If we look at SDG4 (quality education and lifelong learning for all), we know that we are way behind the targets with the situation further exacerbated by the pandemic. We know that billions of dollars will need to be invested in infrastructure and resources in order to fast-track progress towards achieving the targets by 2030.

But we are not talking about the environmental costs of achieving SDG4, because the biggest emitter of carbon is the construction industry with cement, steel, and electricity. Brick-and-mortar institutions are not going to be the answer for the future. Distance learning can provide a solution for reducing the carbon footprint of the education sector.

But where's the evidence? The Open University UK studied the online programs in the UK and found that the carbon footprint of the online student was lower than that of the campus-based student. They developed the SusTEACH framework, which we then used at the National University of Botswana and Open University of Botswana. The carbon footprint of the Open University of Botswana learner was 1/3 compared to that of their campus counterpart.

More research is needed in this area so that we have solid evidence to convince policymakers about the range of benefits that distance learning can provide. There is enough evidence that if done well, distance education can reduce costs, improve quality, and increase access and equity. But now we've got another dimension, the ecology dimension where we need more of research.

After discussions with nine Ministers of Education and experts, including from UNESCO and the Commonwealth Secretariat, COL developed a report for the Commonwealth Ministers of Education called Transforming Education for Climate Action with concrete recommendations of what is doable, what ministers can do, what teachers can do, what other stakeholders can do, etc. That report is available[10].

The report promotes the idea that we should have a green learning agenda integrated into all our practices. In addition to distance learning delivery as good environmental conservation, we should develop a green curriculum and a green campus. And when we talk about a green learning agenda, we must remember that this includes the blue agenda. Most of the participating ministers were from small states and argued that 'green' reflects a big state perspective while 'blue' draws attention to the specific situation of small states, surrounded by big blue oceans, with livelihoods dependent on the blue economy. Green, of course, includes blue.

What's this green learning agenda? First, we must develop skills for the green and blue economies to transition to a low carbon economy. Pilot projects and pockets of excellence that are not yet mainstreamed should be scaled up. Second, each one of us needs to change our behaviors at the level of the individual, the family, the community, and the society. Finally, we need skills for green transformation. We need to focus on social justice because whenever there is a climate disaster, the vulnerable, the poor, and women are the most impacted. In fact, there's enough data to indicate the adverse impacts on women. And yet, when you implement climate change actions, it's the women who can have the best impact in saving the environment and conserving it. Social justice is important.

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[10] Commonwealth of Learning. (2022). *Transforming education for climate action: Report to Commonwealth Ministers.* Commonwealth of Learning. https://iite.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Transforming-Education-for-Climate-Action.pdf

The COL can be described by the four R's. Reduce carbon emissions within the organization by having paperless meetings, etc. Raise awareness about climate change through evidence-based advocacy. Reskill for green jobs and a greener future. Finally, build resilience in the education sector. One example was helping small states like Dominica to digitize content and upload on the cloud so that when cyclones hit, the educational materials are secure.

BC:

Women have played an important role in creating ODDE programs for sustainability. You authored several notable publications about women in distance education, and you were involved in ICDE's Women's International Network (WIN)[11]. How and why did the WIN end and do you see a need for a similar initiative today?

AK:

I was in WIN towards its final days. The need did not disappear. Rather, some of the four or five women leaders moved on. The next generation did not seem as interested, which is why I think that it's very important for distance learning gurus to bring up a second cadre of leaders so that there is continuity and change with no vacuums. We worked on that at COL to document and recognize the unsung distance education leaders in the Caribbean, the Pacific, Africa, and Asia. This was one way of highlighting the contributions of the lesser-known names.

As we know, gender equality issues haven't gone away. But we do what we can, and at COL, we did several things. One was capacity development. One of the gaps we found was women's lack of expertise in information and communication technologies (ICTs). So, we started an annual program of ICT and leadership training for mid-career university academics. We also trained mid-career school teachers in coding and programming. Additionally, we provided training for women and girls for their livelihoods in grassroots communities. Many countries still face the challenge of marrying girls off at the young age of 12-14 years old, even when the laws prohibit it. I remember meeting a 14-year-old girl from Bangladesh who, because of the skills training she received, was now working in a tea shop, and her marriage had been averted. Since she was bringing money into the home, the family let her go back to an open school. Once the girls have some income, then they have a better sense of agency and voice within the family and the community.

Distance learning provides flexibility, which is a great asset for women and girls. For example, a study conducted by *Coursera* during the pandemic found that over 45% of the women surveyed said that they would not have been able to study if the courses hadn't been online. The need is still there to build women's capacity in ICT, especially in artificial intelligence, where gender biases are being detected in large language models.

BC:

Did you experience personal challenges as a female in higher education and how did you navigate those obstacles?

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[11] WIN served as a network for women in distance education to improve practices that ensure gender diversity and inclusion. For further information, see: Faith, K. (1988). Gender as an Issue in Distance Education. *International Journal of E-Learning & Distance Education Revue Internationale Du E-Learning Et La Formation à Distance, 3*(1), 75–79. https://www.ijede.ca/index.php/jde/article/view/536

AK:

In general, you'll find that there are more women than men in higher education today at the university level in most countries whether you take Brunei, the US, Canada, the UK, or South Africa, but there are still very few women in leadership positions. For example, there are only two women Chancellors, among the 18 open universities in India as of now. As a woman, it is easy to become invisible in large gatherings. I never go to a conference unless I have a speaking slot because even as the President of COL, it was easy to be overlooked. But when I shared ideas and insights, I had visibility. I think women need to make that effort to go and get themselves heard.

But prejudices persist because of the kinds of stereotypes that we have been conditioned to. To run an effective organization, you need to be decisive, make difficult calls, and have strong opinions. Now, all these traits, if they are manifested in men, are considered good leadership qualities. But in women, they are often considered aggressive and nasty behavior.

I've been very fortunate in all my institutions/organizations. I joined COL as an Education Specialist in 2003, became Vice President in 2006, and then the President and CEO in 2012. I was lucky to have good mentors and bosses who were very supportive. However, stereotyping and differential behavior have not disappeared. I agree with Sheryl Sandberg[12] that the more successful you are, the less liked you are, and as we know, nobody likes to be disliked.

BC:

What trends have you noticed about women in distance education? Do you recommend any particular strategies that have proven successful for gender equity in the field or target areas that still need more work?

AK:

We need leadership training, building expertise in ICT and STEM-related fields, and mentoring the next generation of women leaders. At COL, I initiated the mentorship program CommonwealthWiseWomen.org, which was helpful for both the mentors and the mentees, especially during the pandemic.

KJ:

How has risk-taking shaped your leadership and career? How can educational leaders be prepared for risk?

AK:

I think you have to be a risk-taker, and you can only do so if you're not afraid to fail. For example, I took a big risk when I left an established campus university, Punjab University, to opt for IGNOU, which was a new institution, and my skeptical colleagues warned me: 'you will be jobless soon'. But it was a risk that served me very well because I had the opportunity to move up and experience four positions as the university grew.

The second big risk I took was when suddenly I got a call about a senior consultancy position at the UNESCO regional office in Dakar. I started from scratch as a newbie in a completely new country, without any French or Wolof, and had to study the map of Africa every day during my tea breaks trying to memorize the layout of the continent. That risk opened the doors of COL to me, a job that opened up tremendous avenues for deploying open and distance learning for

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12 Sandberg, S. & Scovell, N. (2013). *Lean in: Women, work and the will to lead*. Alfred A. Knopf.

development. Now, I'm here in China, where I was invited to be a Chair Professor at the Smart Learning Institute at Beijing Normal University, where the focus is on research in smart education - in integrating technology and pedagogy with a human-centered approach. Prof. Ronghui Huang is leading the research on smart education for over a decade with a major impact on institutions in China and beyond. The Smart Learning Institute is a global leader in this field with its own journal and publications. Going back to a university after two decades in development is a risk with the added challenge of language but it's also an opportunity to contribute and add value from a development perspective!

BC:

Based on your extensive leadership in ODDE, what topics do you recommend for future research?

AK:

We need more authoritative studies on the carbon footprint of distance learning and the use of Generative AI. Especially on the gender bias in Large Language Models which can further amplify the existing gender divides in society. We also need more research into how to implement lifelong learning at open universities. We find a commitment to promoting lifelong learning in the mission statements of many open universities, but what we're doing is simply opening up tertiary education opportunities to people of all ages. With the changing demographics and ageing societies, we need to look into what different constituencies want to learn and how we can facilitate that process. Another suggestion is about how to 'domesticate' technologies for reaching the last person in the queue. This is something of great interest, especially in China, where the technology is very advanced and there is substantial interest in the metaverse and in augmented and virtual reality. But what about those on the other side of the digital divide? In Sub-Saharan Africa, internet connectivity is only 40% compared to the global average of 67%. We need proactive approaches and concrete strategies. For example, the Open University of China has a 'One Village, One Graduate' initiative to bring tertiary education to remote regions. Their University for Seniors caters to learners of the 'third age'. Persons with disabilities are known to prefer distance education – how do we harness appropriate technologies to reach them? With imagination and creativity, we can certainly take open and distance learning to the next level.

BC & KJ:

Thank you very much.