

Online, Open, and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: Discussion Paper

A discussion paper prepared by International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

It is estimated that 414.2 million students will be enrolled in higher education around the world by 2030 – an increase from 99.4 million in 2000¹.

Who will these students be?

What strategies are necessary to support their success?

What do higher education institutions need to do to ensure that these students receive value from their education and that society values the education provided?

How will the work of higher education contribute to promoting access, equity, and quality learning outcomes?

How can faculty have a lead in creating the future higher education that we want?

¹ Economist Intelligence Unit. (2015) *Connecting universities: Future models of higher education. Analyzing innovative models for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka*. The British Council and Economist Intelligence Unit.

Purpose of this Paper

From June 9-11, 2015, UNESCO, in partnership with ICDE, will be hosting a Global High Level Policy Forum at UNESCO's Paris Headquarters on "**Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want. From Statements to Action: Equity, Access, and Quality Learning Outcomes.**" This invitational event will be an engaged forum for exchange aimed at developing a best practice framework for higher education, which highlights access, flexibility, affordability, engagement, student success and quality.

The focus is on possible policy, at the levels of governments, institutions, and in terms of innovation and research. Governments have three general types of public policy instruments they can use to enact their policies – regulations, economic means, and information². In addition, institutional, innovation, and research policies guide and reflect development at those more specific levels.

So that the participants in this Forum can share a baseline of information, this paper is the first step in a process to gather and share perspectives on the key policy issues, as well as possible responses based on international best practices. What this process involves is summarized below:

1. This discussion paper examines the issues of equity, access, and quality learning outcomes in light of some of the realities and creative responses encountered internationally. In this context, it presents specific issues, strategies, and opportunities for the future of higher education, in particular the possible contributions of online, open and flexible higher education.
2. Throughout the paper are **Questions for Consideration** regarding the issues and strategies for improving access, equity, and quality learning outcomes in higher education and the overall contributions of open and distance learning. These questions are posed to stimulate thought and consideration on some of the key issues to be discussed at the Paris Forum.
3. In addition, **Questions for Response** in the form of a questionnaire is attached to solicit your opinions on strategies, benefits, challenges, and police alternatives for online, open, and flexible learning in higher education. Even if you are not planning to attend the Global High Level Policy Forum, your response would be a valuable. To contribute your input, please respond to the questionnaire included with this e-mail contribution to your colleagues' discussions at this event.
4. The questionnaire includes a number of quick answers, multiple choice questions that we hope you all take the time to complete. In addition, there are a few open-ended questions in which we request your opinions, ideas, and experiences. We would be grateful for your keyword, point-form answer to one or, hopefully, all of the questions.

² Bemelmans-Vedung, M-L et al. (2003) *Carrots, sticks, and sermons: Policy instruments and their evaluation*. Transaction Publishers. Available at <http://www.transactionpub.com/title/Carrots,-Sticks,-and-Sermons-978-0-7658-0546-1.html>

5. Your replies will remain anonymous, compiled into inclusive responses without individual attribution.
6. To contribute your ideas, please respond to the questionnaire included with this e-mail. Questions or other input can be sent to ICDE at icde@icde.org. It would be most helpful to have your feedback by **Friday May 8, 2015**.
7. Your responses to the questions in this Discussion Paper will be consolidated into a **What We Heard Paper**.
8. This **Discussion Paper** and the **What We Heard Paper** will be consolidated into a **Background Report** entitled **Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: Policy Challenges**. At the Paris Forum, this complete Background Report will guide the debates, shaping the policy and practice recommendations, as well as the decisions arising from the event.
9. The Background Report will be made widely available – through UNESCO, ICDE, and various partner websites

Through this process, those to be engaged in the conversation in Paris can share a baseline of understanding, developed from the reaction of their peers to this **Discussion Paper**, and can see the varying implications across the world. Participants can also be better informed about policy initiatives to make a difference in terms of equity, access, and quality learning outcomes.

Realities and Issues Facing the Achievement of Access, Equity and Quality Learning Outcomes

Within higher education, there are certain realities that underline the crucial nature of improving access, equity, and quality learning outcomes simultaneously. Some of these realities are presented in this discussion paper and your reactions to these realities, as well as your examples of effective responses and best practices, are requested as a part of your input.

ACCESS

Access implies that educational institutions are open to all those who are qualified, with qualifications set so as not to impede any particular groups.

1. **Access to and success in higher education are critical components of a national social and economic development agenda.** Economic growth, social cohesion, health and well-being and resilient communities are all aided by an increase in the educational levels of the population. The rationale for the expansion of higher education is rooted in a view of a global knowledge economy, which values knowledge, understanding and

skills as the keys to the social and economic well-being of nations. In addition, higher education provides the teachers who are the core of the education offered to children and youth.

2. **Access alone is insufficient to enable higher education institutions to achieve the social and economic impact of which they are capable.** Completion of relevant, engaging and quality programmes is as important as access. In higher education, an open door which becomes a revolving door helps no one.
3. **A key barrier to access and success is cost.** As governments reduce their contributions to the financing of higher education per capita, then more of the cost burden falls on students and their families. Access to ICT infrastructures and high capacity networks is a part of the cost issue. Affordability of quality learning is a key social and political issue, which becomes more apparent as access is expanded.

Question for Consideration

1. **What policies and approaches, especially in open, online and flexible learning, have you found to be useful in addressing issues of Access?**

EQUITY

Equity goes beyond access. It implies special efforts being made to ensure the inclusion and success of certain groups of learners who, for whatever reasons, have not enjoyed equitable participation in or graduation from higher education.

1. **The Implications of Culture:** Not all families, communities, institutions, and government policy frameworks know how to or do support certain groups of higher education learners. For example, those who are first in the families to attend higher education, those from low income families, indigenous peoples, or from under-represented groups.
2. **The Restrictions of Geography:** Many higher education institutions are located in large population centres. Students living away from these centres – rural and remote students – find accessing quality learning in disciplines appropriate to their interests and skills difficult. Online, open, and flexible learning can address some of these needs, but additional supports have to be in place.
3. **The Limitations of Gender:** While access to higher education by women has greatly increased over the last 30 years, there are still regions of the world where women have yet to achieve equity of access. More progress towards equity of access and support for success for women is needed.
4. **The Implications of Disability:** Disabilities, whether linked to physical or learning conditions, have a devastating effect of participation in higher education. Special

supports, assistance, technologies, and adaptations of space are all necessary to allow equitable opportunities and success.

5. **Lack of Differentiated and Effective Support:** Not all students arrive at higher education institutions with the knowledge and skills to succeed. Academic, personal, financial, and learning skill support can all be effectively structured and made widely available to help all students. Many institutions have found that electronic delivery of learning support is particularly effective.
6. **Resilience and Persistence:** Drop-out rates for higher education remain high with many students who start a programme, not completing. Persistence and completion are especially related to the challenge of equity. In some studies, open and online students are more likely to leave before programme or course completion. Special supports and interaction can reduce this risk.
7. **Institutional Implications:** Equity of outcomes requires differential instruction, stronger relationships between students and the academic and support systems, as well as effective peer networks to support learners, especially those who are struggling. Building learner resilience is as important as teaching content.
8. **Broader Policy Implications:** Some students require broader social policy (living or minimum wages, social housing, poverty reduction, social action programmes, community development). However, certain national policies can make a difference (e.g. policies concerning student costs).

Question for Consideration

2. **What policies and approaches, especially in open and distance learning, have you found to be useful in addressing issues of Equity?**

QUALITY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Quality learning outcomes are linked not only to the goals and objectives of each course, but also to the goals, aspirations, and future success of each student, the community and the nation.

1. **Improving access and equity in higher education does not, in itself, produce economic, social, or personal gains for the graduates.** Much depends on what kind of higher education students are able to access. As part of quality learning outcomes, relevance is a key issue in the design of programmes and courses. Relevance applies not just to the near term job market (which is itself fast changing), but also to the social and personal skills needed for success in society and to the need to be an adaptive, resilient and lifelong learner.

2. **Quality differs between institutions.** There is no such thing as a universal quality template for higher education. Quality is a function of strategic goals, competencies required, resources and social conditions. Quality needs to be determined in terms of intended learning outcomes, student engagement, availability of resources, teaching quality, supports for learning and the quality of student work. The impact of learning on the subsequent careers and community impact of students can also be a part of the quality assessment.
3. **Access to different kinds of learning processes has the potential to improve quality.** Technology can support enhanced quality in learning by accessing resources and experts from around the world, offering extended practice and feedback, offering various viewpoints and opportunities for exploration, and supporting more effective and engaging pedagogy. But where its use is limited or unreliable, technology can affect not only quality, but access and equity as well.
4. **An adaptive capacity is essential for higher education institutions to be able to respond to multiple demands.** The term ‘adaptive capacity’ refers to both a readiness for change and the ability to act quickly to adapt to changing conditions. Higher education institutions are being asked to do more to enable success for traditionally under-represented groups while at the same time expanding to meet demand for access and quality learning outcomes, often under conditions of resource scarcity. Higher education institutions must plan for further expansion of quality programmes, which are highly engaging, relevant and aligned with the development needs of a country or region without damaging the integrity of their current work.
5. **Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) can have a major impact on higher education.** UNESCO’s review of the impact of open education and OER in higher education³ summarizes recent developments and suggests that “It is clear that openness is here to stay and is changing the nature of higher education and therefore it is essential for institutions to engage with openness as a potential core organizational value if they wish to remain relevant and contribute to the positive advancement of the field of higher education.”
6. **Quality learning outcomes require the balancing of pedagogy with technology.** Students who study using open and distance education generally have comparable results to those taking part in face-to-face instruction⁴. However, online, open, and flexible education requires a set of instructional design and technological development and deployment skills, which few faculty members have. Equally, many experts in technology are not experts either in the subject matter or in the nature of adult learning.
7. **Quality program and course development, assessment, deployment, and delivery systems often require a different model from that currently used in most post-**

³ UNESCO (2014) *How Openness Impacts on Higher Education- Policy Brief*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at <http://iite.unesco.org/pics/publications/en/files/3214734.pdf>

⁴ Wu, D. (2015) *Online Learning in Post Secondary Education – A Review of the Empirical Literature (2013-14)* Ithaca S+R. Available at http://sr.ithaka.org/sites/default/files/reports/SR_Report_Online_Learning_Postsecondary_Education_Review_Wu_031115.pdf; see also www.nosignificantdifference.org

secondary institutions. Access, equity, and quality learning outcomes remain as issues, along with concerns for active student involvement in their learning and successful course completion. The focus needs to be on pedagogy and design as enabled by technology⁵.

Question for Consideration

3. What policies and approaches, especially in online and open learning have you found to be useful in addressing issues of Quality Learning Outcomes? How do these relate to the broader issue of quality assurance?

Policies and Strategies to Address Access, Equity and Quality Learning Outcomes

Governments and educators have been addressing these critical issues and have found many successful policy and action approaches. Among these are:

- **The development of mega universities** – There are institutions in Bangladesh, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, each with over a million enrolled students. The largest is the Indira Gandhi National Open University, based in New Delhi, with over 3 million enrolled students. At least sixty-degree granting entities enroll over 100,000 students each, providing broad access.
- **The development of open universities.** Admission at these open institutions is open, but completion is based on performance. Well-known examples include The Open University (UK), Athabasca University (Canada), Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (Thailand) and the University of South Africa..
- **The growth of differentiation within higher education** – More and more institutions are seeking to differentiate themselves from their sister institutions within and between jurisdiction, focusing on specific areas of study. For example, the recently created Oceans University of Sri Lanka focuses on maritime and sea transport logistics, while the Institute for International Law in Abu Dhabi does what its name implies. There are a great many technical and polytechnic institutions, as well as schools of design, art and other focused institutions. Some institutions are exclusively for women, indigenous peoples and minorities. Differentiation in institutions may be used to both broaden access to more groups, or to favour select groups, who may be those traditionally under-represented in higher education. Differentiation can also be used as a way of keeping the higher quality institutions limited to the elite.
- **The involvement of private provision.** Private provision of higher education is an established approach in some countries, while in others it is relatively new and growing

⁵ Contact North (2014) *A New Pedagogy is Emerging*. Available at <http://contactnorth.ca/trends-directions/evolving-pedagogy-0/new-pedagogy-emergingand-online-learning-key-contributing>

fast. This can add capacity and nimbleness to higher education provision, as well as complexity. Not all of these private developments are for profit; there are also significant non-profit and philanthropic institutions, such as Pontificia Universidade Católica de São Paulo in Brazil or Amity University in India. Some 80% of higher education students in the Philippines are enrolled in private institutions, which also play a major role in a number of other countries such as Belgium, Colombia, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea and Nigeria, to name a few.

- **The growth of dual mode institutions.** Distance education has been growing steadily for decades; with online learning expanding quickly in the last few years. Many higher education institutions all over the world offer their students an option of online learning, whether for selected courses or for entire programmes. Online access may be used to increase enrolment, to offer more options to existing students, and/or to re-design large enrolment courses to make them more interactive and less lecture-based, as well as reach groups of students who cannot travel to campus.
- **The growth of blended learning.** Many institutions have successfully combined online learning with face-to-face classrooms in terms of both delivery and pedagogy. This blended delivery is often offered in the flipped classroom model in which the theory is delivered online through readings, videos, quizzes, and visuals. The face-to-face classroom may feature the professor working through problems and situations that apply the information. In addition, there may be small group work, in which the students apply the theory to real-world examples. This interaction is more informed by prior knowledge of theory, supporting student engagement, creation, and knowledge building.
- **The growth of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).** Universities all over the world have experimented with MOOCs and several have made a longer-term commitment to their creation and integration. MOOCs may be used as parts of courses in the originating institutions and adapted for use as educational resources in many others. In addition, students may enrol for their own interest, unrelated to any institutional programme or credit. Some institutions now offer credit for these free to study courses, with Malaysia being the first jurisdiction to mandate their use for all of its public universities.
- **The emergence of Open Educational Resources (OER).** UNESCO defines OER as “teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions”. Students are able to study through the use of OER which are integrated into their courses. In some cases, OER can be part of Prior Learning Recognition and Assessment or other approaches in which students are assessed on what they have learned for credit. This credit may then be able to be transferred to institutions around the world. For example, the OERu⁶ seeks to provide exactly this service.

⁶ For more information, see <http://oeru.org/how-it-works/>

- **The focus on student engagement and active learning:** Completion rates for programmes and courses increase according to how relevant students think the learning is to their personal and career needs and interests. Strategies for increasing practical applications and relevancy include project based work, co-op programmes, internship, lab and field work. Active engagement in learning, with discussions, debates, case studies offered online or in-class, also results in higher completion, according to the findings from the most recent annual report of the *United States National Study of Student Engagement*⁷. The pedagogy of online learning often focuses on student involvement and interaction as a way of supporting completion and optimum learning.

Questions for Consideration

4. **What aspects of policy at the national or institutional levels have, in your experience, been essential to the introduction or expansion of online, open and flexible learning?**
5. **How has (or will) open, online and flexible learning been integrated into the long-term strategy of your institution? What policies have guided these changes?**

Specific Actions to Turn Commitment into Reality

The deliberations at the Paris Forum are positioned at a decisive moment within the international context focused on development and education. To illustrate this, the highly significant international goals and reports are outlined below, with links to facilitate their consultation.

In 2000, world leaders, meeting at the United Nations, committed themselves to global partnerships to reduce extreme poverty, resulting in the eight [Millennial Development Goals](#), to be reached by 2015. The essential contribution of education to this effort was underlined by Goal 2 to “achieve universal primary education”.

In that same year, at the World Education Forum in Dakar, 164 governments agreed on the Dakar Framework for Action: [Education for All](#), comprising six key educational goals to meet the learning need of all children, youth and adults. UNESCO was asked to take the lead for this initiative and, as part of this responsibility, initiated the Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Reports.

The recently released [2015 EFA Global Monitoring Report: Education for All 2000-2015: Achievements and Challenges](#) highlights progress in the number of children in school, as well as concerns, such as inequality of access, especially in conflict zones, poor quality of learning and under-financing of education. The report makes recommendations for the crucial role of education in the sustainable development agenda currently being established.

⁷ National Study of Student Engagement (2014) *Bringing the Institutions into Focus – Annual Report*. Available at http://nsse.iub.edu/NSSE_2014_Results/pdf/NSSE_2014_Annual_Results.pdf See especially pages 18-21.

To move forward from the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations is working to outline [Sustainable Development Goals](#) for the period 2015 - 2030. Among the proposed goals is a commitment to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Goal 4).

As a crucial contribution to the process of defining these goals and their achievement, UNESCO is organizing, in close collaboration with other UN agencies as co-conveners, the [World Education Forum](#) 2015 in the Republic of Korea. Among the goals of this Forum is the agreement on a joint position for the education goal and targets in the post-2015 development agenda, which will be adopted by UN Member States at a Summit in September 2015, as well as the development of a comprehensive Framework for Action to guide and support the implementation of the future education agenda.

Open, online and flexible education has a role to play in the achievement of the post-2015 development goals of all nations, and attention has been made to its potential contributions. Policy makers, leaders of higher education institutions and others met in Bali, Indonesia, in November 2014 for an [International Council on Open and Distance Education \(ICDE\) and UNESCO Policy Forum](#). The participants stressed that “a new commitment is necessary to opening up education, technology-enabled learning, the use of open educational resources, online, flexible and blended learning, and research in innovation, design, development, deployment, and delivery of education at all levels”⁸.

The core message from the attendees at the Bali Policy Forum, structured around the concept of **Equity – Access – Quality: Learner Success**, stated that:

“It is not only having equal access that leads to equity; it is having equal access to success, regardless of learning difficulties, social backgrounds, and other barriers.”⁹

The participants in the Bali Policy Forum developed [a list of actions involving multiple players](#), which in their view, would turn this broad commitment statement into reality. Actions were outlined for governments, quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions, and academic staff.

It is these documents, commitments, and goals for 2015-2030 that will anchor the discussions in Paris within the broader context of the contribution of education to sustainable development.

Online, open and flexible learning face both opportunities and challenges in working towards the “Future We Want”. In addition to the issues of access, equity, access, equity and quality learning outcomes, some fundamental questions underlie the adoption and spread of online learning.

⁸ ICDE (2014) *ICDE-UNESCO Policy Forum on open, online and flexible learning calls for action*. Available at

http://www.icde.org/en/icde_news/ICDE++UNESCO+Policy+Forum+on+open%2C+online+and+flexible+learning+calls+for+actions+by+governments%2C+h.b7C_wRrOXp.ips

⁹ ICDE (2014) *ICDE-UNESCO Policy Forum*. Available at http://www.icde.org/?module=Articles;action=Article_publicShow;ID=5440

Questions for Consideration

6. How have student expectations changed in response to the latest technological innovations? What influence has this had on learning outcomes?

7. How have you seen collaborations and partnerships making a contribution to sustaining excellence, innovation and inclusion in online, open and flexible learning at the institutional, national, regional or international levels?

Conclusion

The **Questions for Consideration** in this paper are to stimulate your thoughts on these issues prior to the Global High Level Policy Forum in Paris.

The **Questions for Response** are to provide an opportunity for widespread input on issues and policy in online, open, and flexible learning in higher education to be collected prior to the Forum in June. With the results of this research shared, participants can come together with a deeper understanding of the starting points for this meeting, have more focused conversations, and work towards increased collaboration in this area at national, regional and international level.

Even if you are not planning to attend the High Level Policy Forum, your response would be a valuable contribution to your colleagues' discussions at this event.

Once your responses to the discussion paper have been submitted by **Friday May 8, 2015**, the final background report, **Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: Policy Challenges**, will be prepared and sent to invited participants, as well as made more widely available through UNESCO, ICDE, and partner websites. To contribute your input, please respond to the questionnaire included with this e-mail.

These issues are “wicked problems” – there are no tame and simple answers. What we need to do is explore these issues in depth so as to ensure continuous improvement of higher education and to enable such changes in policy as do take place to improve access, equity, and quality learning outcomes.

Your contributions to this discussion are highly appreciated.