COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

Guidelines on Distance Education during COVID-19

Guidelines on Distance Education during COVID-19

COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to promote the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

Contents

Foreword

Over 90 per cent of the world's student population is out of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic. No one was prepared for the unprecedented learning crisis that needs to be addressed immediately.

Distance and online learning have become the only means for educational institutions to keep the doors of learning open. For some of them, this is an entirely new experience and uncharted territory. How can we help them and each other tide over this crisis?

As an intergovernmental organisation mandated to promote the use of Distance Education to improve access to quality education and training, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has been supporting governments and educational institutions in the Commonwealth since 1987. COL has developed the 'Guidelines on Distance Education during COVID-19' to help governments, educational institutions, regulatory agencies, parents, and students effectively deal with this crisis so that no one is left behind.

This is not the time for too much planning; concrete action is needed on the ground to help ministries, teachers and students to continue the teaching-learning process with the least disruption possible. COL has initiated several joint activities aimed at building the capacity of staff in distance and online provision and harnessing the potential of Open Educational Resources (OER) to offer quality content. COL's extensive knowledge and expertise in the field of distance and technology-enabled learning underpin these *Guidelines* and provide a practical roadmap for both policy makers and practitioners.

The *Guidelines* have been reviewed by experts in the field from around the Commonwealth and I thank each one of them for their generous support. COL believes that knowledge is our common wealth and now is the time to support each other and work for our common future.

Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO
Commonwealth of Learning

Acknowledgements

1.INTRODUCTION

1.   Introduction

The recent closure of campuses due to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a challenge that has existed for many years.

An education system that assumes the physical presence of teachers and students in the same space at the same time automatically excludes some students and cannot respond easily to circumstances that force closure, whether this is due to a pandemic, conflict, floods, fires or some other disaster. When institutions closed as a result of the pandemic, open universities and open schools could still remain open. This is because distance education (DE) does not require teachers and students to be in the same place at the same time for learning to happen.

Because learners and teachers are separated by time and space, some kind of technology or media must be used for communication between them. Learners receive self-learning materials in various formats – print, audio, video and computer – and are provided ongoing tutorial support with optional face-to-face interaction. DE embraces a range of possibilities from offline (print only) to fully online provision, and a blend of both. Recently, the term 'remote learning' has come into wide use. Remote learning is an emergency measure which attempts to replicate the classroom teaching and learning process in an online mode and can also be considered a form of DE.

Many countries and institutions have sought to move directly to online provision in the face of campus closures. Given the uneven development of technologies in various countries, online learning cannot be seen as the only solution for remote, rural and resource-poor communities. Over the last fifty years, institutions engaged in DE have shown that quality teaching and learning can be offered at a distance using a range of technologies – print, radio, television, computer and the Internet. Developments in web technologies and increased access to mobile applications open new possibilities, but solutions must be tailored to specific contexts.

1.1. Purpose of the Guidelines

The *Guidelines* provide practical directions for the use of DE tools and practices to support teaching and learning and offer suggestions on the use of appropriate technology to address the social and pedagogical issues of learning in a crisis situation.

The purpose is to provide a road map for decision makers in governments and institutions to invest in the systematic integration of good DE practices in their specific contexts, keeping in view the challenges of equity and inclusion. Parents and students can benefit from the *Guidelines* by adopting appropriate practices that will facilitate the learning process.

These *Guidelines* are generic and need to be adapted for different situations. DE can be applied effectively in secondary, post-secondary and technical education contexts. The *Guidelines* may be used along with resources and toolkits available from COL's institutional repository (http://oasis.col.org) and elsewhere.

1.2. Distance Education as an appropriate innovation

DE as an innovation in education has evolved to serve the needs of different contexts and constituencies.

It has proved effective in secondary education, teacher training, higher education, and skills development — reaching students from the remote deserts in Africa, to small atolls in the Pacific, to large numbers of rural learners in Asia. In a pandemic, DE allows learning to continue while observing travel restrictions and physical distancing requirements. The social mission of education has been central to DE which has always catered to marginalised students and those in remote locations. As an innovation, it is built around sound pedagogical principles and leverages the power of technologies. With advances in technology, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which is another form of DE, have become popular. COL's *MOOC for Development* provides simple technology solutions such as a basic mobile phone interface, social media integration and delivery in low bandwidth situations to reach grassroots communities.

1.2.1 Benefits of Distance Education

Research shows that DE can increase access to education, improve quality, reduce costs, support inclusion and lower the carbon footprint of the education sector.

a) **Access:** DE can increase access to learning for large numbers of students. Open universities in the Commonwealth alone cater to more than 4.4 million students (COL, 2017), while the National Institute of Open Schooling (India) reports a cumulative enrolment of 2.71 million (NIOS, 2020). Because of its flexibility, DE is beneficial to students who have familial or social responsibilities that prevent them from accessing campus-based education (Tait, 2018). DE can reach many marginalised groups, including women and persons with disabilities (PWD), helping them access learning from any place, at any pace and at the times convenient to them (UNESCO, 2016).

b) **Cost:** DE achieves economies of scale which makes it possible to reduce the cost for both students and institutions. In mega open universities and open schools, the costs per student can be anything from one half to one third of the costs of a campus institution (NKC, 2009). Online provision too can result in significant cost savings. One study revealed that the cost per unit of online training was 55 per cent less than face-to-face training, with comparable outcomes (Jung, 2005). In technical and vocational education and training (TVET), blended approaches to DE combined with workplace learning reduce costs. Practical activities can be held in existing physical infrastructure on weekends and during evening hours. Adoption of Open Educational Resources (OER) further reduces the cost of course development (Butcher, & Hoosen, 2012) and improves access to learning materials.

c) **Quality:** Research shows that there is 'no significant difference' between distance and traditional classroom instruction in terms of learning outcomes (Russell, 1999). If done well, ODL is as effective as campus provision in leading to learning outcomes and satisfaction (Bernard et al., 2004, Means, Toyama, Murphy, & Baki, 2013). Moreover, distance learning is based on a student-centred approach to education, facilitating lifelong learning skills such as self-directed learning, discipline and critical thinking. A recent rapid research brief from Australia also suggests that 'blended learning', combining face-to-face and remote learning, may be as effective as classroom learning for many students (Finkel, 2020).

d) **Inclusion:** With 15 per cent of the world's population experiencing some form of disability, the participation of PWD in education remains dismally low (WHO, 2011). Persons with disabilities prefer ODL because of its flexibility, affordability, ability to study at home and the degree of anonymity that it provides. Assistive technologies and resources can accommodate specific learning requirements in different contexts (Boskic, Starcher, Kelly, & Hapke, 2008).

e) **Environment:** The education sector contributes to both direct and indirect emissions, with an impact on environmental degradation. Studies show that distance teaching models have a significantly lower environmental impact than face-to-face teaching modes (Caird, Lane, Swithenby, Roy, & Potter, 2015). Following research by the Open University, UK, COL conducted a similar study in Botswana, which found that the average carbon footprint of the face-to-face group was nearly three times greater than that of the distance learning group (Carr, Modesto, Balasubramanian, Ortlieb, & Lesperance, 2019).

1.2.2 Key Elements of Distance Education

While DE can be implemented through various technologies and approaches, the learner must be at the centre of planning and implementation. Key considerations for the effective design and delivery of a DE programme are:

a) **Learning resources:** Content is designed to support self-learning and made accessible to students using a variety of media and technology, including print, radio, television, computers, mobiles and the Internet. When there are clear objectives and support to achieve specific learning outcomes, effective teaching and learning can happen without students and teachers being in the same place at the same time.

b) **Pedagogy:** Teaching and learning is based on sound pedagogical principles of guided-didactic conversation (Holmberg, 1983), and appropriate use of two-way communication tools and technologies that help support dialogue and communication. Interaction between students and other students, students and teachers and students and content results in deeper understanding and is an integral part of DE. In order to benefit maximally from DE opportunities, students need to be guided to develop self-directed learning skills.

c) **Learner support:** Providing psychological and emotional support to learners at a distance alongside continuous academic interaction are keys to student success. Caring human support at a distance facilitates self-directed learning, reduces student isolation, and creates an environment for student engagements in learning (Simpson, 2013).

d) **Administration:** DE is an industrialised form of teaching and learning characterised by division of labour (Peters, 2001). In order to implement effective teaching and learning at a distance, planning and organisation of the teaching and learning process from curriculum development to assessment of student learning needs to be managed by an efficient and accountable administration.

2.GUIDELINESS

2.1. Guidelines for governments
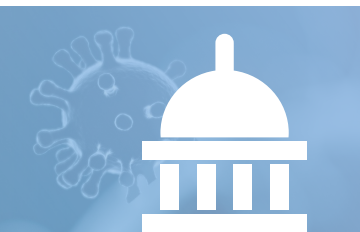
To support a move towards DE, there is a need for policy directives as well as financial assistance for educational institutions. Governments are responsible for setting the quality standards and must create enabling policy frameworks and environments for supporting DE. The *Guidelines* can support governments to take appropriate measures to make a transition to DE methods and practices in order to minimise the disruptions caused by the pandemic and build resilient systems for the future.

a) *Develop appropriate national policies/frameworks* to mainstream DE, without making a distinction between distance, online, and face-to-face provision in terms of the qualifications awarded. The policies must focus on standard learning outcomes or competencies irrespective of modes of learning.

b) *Develop policies which are inclusive and focus on PWD* to ensure that no one is left behind.

c) *Promote national ICT and connectivity strategy.* The biggest challenge impacting a transition to DE is the lack of ubiquitous access to computers and the Internet. It is necessary to boost investments in providing access to technology infrastructure at educational institutions, ensuring that appropriate and affordable technologies are deployed to reach the last mile.

d) *Promote national platforms* to support online learning. The platforms must be robust to cater to large numbers and support a range of technologies including radio and TV. The platforms must also make provision for assistive technologies to include PWD.

e) *Provide financial support schemes for students* (especially women/girls and low-income students) to access technologies for personal use. Negotiate with Internet and Mobile Service Providers to provide 'zero rating' access to educational platforms in line with the universal service obligations of the providers.

f) *Adopt an OER policy* that will promote the development and sharing of quality content.

g) *Encourage cooperation between institutions* to avoid duplication of efforts by offering incentives for shared activities and collaboration.

2.2. Guidelines for educational institutions

Educational institutions have typically followed a campus-based model, but the COVID-19 situation has forced many of them to adopt online learning. The *Guidelines* will be helpful for both campus and distance education institutions to continue the teaching and learning process for all.

a) *Develop and implement technology-enabled learning policies/strategies* that are accessible and appropriate for the needs of learners. This would involve making appropriate technology choices such as print, radio, television and the Internet to suit different contexts.

b) *Facilitate the design and development* of blended learning environments (Cleveland-Innes, & Wilton, 2018) using suitable online systems, including Learning Management Systems to support teaching and learning to achieve expected learning outcomes.

c) *Prioritise capacity building* of staff to adopt DE approaches, including blended and fully online models. Establish specialist units and identify champions to support wide capacity-building for a sustainable and resilient organisation.

d) *Provide incentives to teachers* to curate and develop OER specific to the curriculum.

e) *Share course content* developed or curated by faculty members through an institutional OER repository to facilitate access by anyone, anywhere, anytime.

f) *Use innovative approaches* to assessment in both offline and online environments. Institutions may review the one-time exit examination system and follow a process of continuous formative assessment to enable student learning and success.

g) *Develop ethical guidelines for the appropriate use of learning analytics* to track student progress and provide support, especially for those at risk. Adequate attention must be paid to privacy issues so that student data is not compromised.

h) *Identify existing open online courses* relevant to approved programmes and create mechanisms to recognise and provide credits for such courses completed by students.

i) *Provide orientation to students* to effectively use online learning and to develop self-directed learning skills by creating an engaging learning enrolments.

j) ***Develop robust student support services using a range of technologies.*** Personal contact must be provided through a variety of means, including telephone, email, discussion boards, appropriate social media to reduce the feeling of isolation and loneliness. Provide call centre facilities for student support, where there are large enrolments. Offer targeted support to disadvantaged students and those in remote locations.

k) ***Ensure the quality of all courses*** offered to students by following an appropriate institutional quality assurance process.

l) ***Strengthen Internet bandwidth*** to provide access to institutional resources as well as digital resources on the web.

m) ***Provide appropriate technology support.*** Technology failures can interrupt learning, and institutions must establish multiple ways of providing remote support.

2.3. Guidelines for academic and support staff

The greatest challenge to academic and support staff is the lack of capacity to effectively transition to DE, including blended and fully online models. Many staff are not trained to use DE methods and tools, and therefore, they will need additional support and mentoring to adjust to the new environment. The *Guidelines* are provided to help academic and support staff take appropriate actions for the effective implementation of DE considering a diversity of learning contexts and needs.

a) ***Approach DE and the teaching process with empathy and care for students*** (Veletsianos, 2020). The learner should be at the centre of every action and staff must ensure that student expectations are met.

b) ***Take proactive steps to adapt to the new environment*** by taking advantage of both offline and online learning opportunities.

c) ***Integrate OER in teaching-learning.*** Using existing OER reduces the time to develop a course and helps teachers focus on interaction and student support. Teachers can draw on quality OER from around the world in various formats and adapt these to local contexts.

d) *Consider student workload while developing activities and graded assignments.* It is important to ensure that the workload assigned is reasonable and realistic. Deadlines for assignments should be staggered so as not to inconvenience the learner.

e) *Make sure that staff are available* at designated times for students to reach them via telephone or social media. Ensure that all student queries are responded to within a specified timeframe. Provide a general space for frequently asked questions and information on the website and the course management system.

f) *Work in teams and develop communities of practices* to avoid duplication of effort, share best practice and leverage lessons learnt.

# 2.4. Guidelines for learners and student bodies

These *Guidelines* are equally applicable to student bodies/associations and individual students. While accessing online learning on the Internet is an issue in developing countries, an increasing number of students have access to mobile devices. Most students use these devices for communication and now need to develop the skills to use them as learning devices. Considering the importance of digital literacy in the 21st Century, students and student bodies must focus on the following:

a) *Develop skills to learn online* and become self-directed learners by accessing appropriate digital tools and short courses.

b) *Engage in group learning activities* to remain connected with peer groups.

c) *Develop a study schedule* to manage time effectively.

d) *Stay connected with teachers and other students* regularly through the telephone, social media and a learning management system.

e) *Develop critical skills* to understand the consequences of plagiarism, privacy issues and the negative impact of misinformation in the digital space.

f) *Student bodies can play a central role in advocating for DE* and provide support to learners who are new to such forms of learning through mentorship and guidance.

2.5. Guidelines for parents
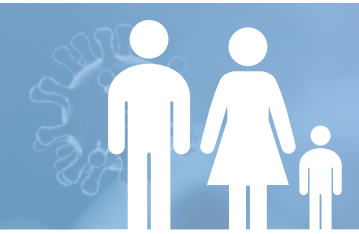
During this crisis, the role of parents has become more important than ever before. They are required to become learning facilitators for their children while at the same time providing psychological support. No longer able to follow the routine of going to school and separated from their peers, children can suffer from loneliness and anxiety. This is exacerbated by the fact that some parents may also need to work from home while supporting their children's studies. This has contributed to stress, uncertainty and mental health issues. Within this context, the following *Guidelines* are offered.

a) *Appreciate that children do not study and learn all the time at school.* Do not expect them to study all the time.

b) *Establish a routine/timetable with the children.* Become a good listener and earmark the time to spend with them. Make provision for exercise and recreation.

c) *Regularly review activities and support adherence to deadlines.* Provide additional support to children who are not used to self-directed learning.

d) *Make sure that children are using secure devices* updated with virus protection while learning online. Set age-appropriate parental controls to supervise the use of websites and apps. It is important for parents to ensure that children are protected from online harassment and gender-based violence.

e) *Communicate with the teacher,* whenever necessary.

f) *Observe all safety and health practices* as recommended by national and international health authorities to serve as a role model for the children.

g) *Prioritise children's well-being* by reaching out to teachers, school counsellors, and outside resources such as help lines. Ensure that children are in a comfortable home environment where they can study in peace.

2.6. Guidelines for quality assurance/ accreditation and academic recognition bodies

Quality assurance (QA) and accreditation agencies play a critical role not only in setting standards, but also in ensuring that the standards are adhered to by educational institutions. While academic standards and norms cannot be diluted at any time, there can be more flexibility in emergency situations. Some of the *Guidelines* for QA agencies and accreditation bodies are:

a) *Update policies and norms to include DE* (blended/online) for teaching and learning. Teaching and learning credits may be based on learning outcomes and the competence achieved rather than the number of hours invested.

b) *Adopt a flexible approach to the accreditation and approval processes* of programmes and educational institutions by adopting online validation processes. Whenever peer team visits are not possible, alternative ways to validate self-study reports may be adopted as temporary measures.

c) *Use synchronous tools for meetings* and consider temporary approvals for specified periods.

d) *Identify and adopt existing guidelines* for blended/online/DE and provide orientation to educational administrators and teachers to ensure quality.

e) *Promote a learning-centred, outcome-focused teaching and learning system* by developing measurable graduate attributes at different levels.

f) *Support evidence-based authentic assessment practices* to measure learning outcomes and reduce the emphasis on face-to-face tests and exams.

g) *Support institutions to move towards self-assessment* based on a systematic process of self-reflection supported by evidence of institutional achievement using existing tools.

h) *Provide guidance to institutions for the development and deployment of systems* to store and transfer credentials in a secure manner using technologies such as blockchain.

References

Bernard, R. M., Abrami, P. C., Lou, Y., Borokhovski, E., Wade, A., Wozney, L., Wallet, P.A., Fiset. M. & Huang, B. (2004). How does distance education compare with classroom instruction? A meta-analysis of the empirical literature. *Review of Educational Research*, *74*(3), 379-439.

Boskic, N., Starcher, K., Kelly, K., & Hapke, N. (2008). Accessibility and Universal Design in S. Hirtz & D. G. Harper (Eds). *Education for a Digital World: Advice, Guidelines, and Effective Practice from around the Globe* (pp. 143-180). Vancouver: BCCampus & COL. Retrieved from http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/52

Butcher, N., & Hoosen, S. (2012). *Exploring the Business Case for Open Educational Resources*. COL: Vancouver. Retrieved from http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/57

Caird, S., Lane, A., Swithenby, E., Roy, R., & Potter, S. (2015). Design of higher education teaching models and carbon impacts. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*,16 (1), 96–111. Retrieved from http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1108/IJSHE-06-2013-0065

Carr, A., Modesto, S., Balasubramanian, K., Ortlieb, K., & Lesperance, J. (2019). Provision Mode and Student Emissions: A Comparative Study from Botswana. In W. L. Filho and S. L. Hemstock (eds). *Climate Change and the Role of Education*
(pp. 107-127). Springer, Cham. Retrieved from https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783030328979

Cleveland-Innes, M. & Wilton, D. (2018). *Guide to blended learning*. Commonwealth of Learning: Burnaby. Retrieved from http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/3095

Commonwealth of Learning [COL]. (2017). *Open Universities in the Commonwealth*. Burnaby: COL. Retrieved from http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/2786

Finkel, A. (2020). Differential learning outcomes for online versus in-class education, A report to Minster of Education, Australia by Australia's Chief Scientist.

Holmberg, B. (1983). Guided didactic conversation in distance education. In D. Sewart, D. Keegan, and B. Holmberg (Eds.), *Distance education: International perspectives* (pp. 114-122). London: Croom Helm

Jung, I. (2005). Cost-Effectiveness of Online Teacher Training. *Open Learning, 20*(2), 131-146. Retrieved from https://www.learntechlib.org/p/68792/

Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., & Baki, M. (2013). The effectiveness of online and blended learning: A meta-analysis of the empirical literature. *Teachers College Record*, *115*(3), 1-47.

National Institute of Open Schooling [NIOS]. (2020). *At a glance*. Retrieved from https://www.nios.ac.in/about-us/at-a-glance.aspx

National Knowledge Commission [NKC], Govt. of India. (2009). *Report to the Nation 2006-2009*. Retrieved from http://14.139.60.153/bitstream/123456789/1267/1/report09.pdf

Peters, O. (2001). *Learning and teaching in distance education: Pedagogical analyses and interpretations in an international perspective*. London: Kogan Page.

Russell, T. L. (1999). *The no significant difference phenomenon: As reported in 355 research reports, summaries and papers*. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina State University.

Simpson, O. (2013). *Supporting students for success in online and distance education*. London: Routledge.

Tait, A. (2018). Education for Development: From Distance to Open Education. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 5(2), 101-115

UNESCO (2016). *Learning for All: guidelines on the inclusion of learners with disabilities in open and distance learning*. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244355

Veletsianos, G. (2020). *Learning Online: The Student Experience*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

World Health Organization. (2011). *World report on disability*. Retrieved from https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/70670/WHO_NMH_VIP_11.01_eng.pdf;jsessionid=E7E69A89C36B10B04C48276AC57BC110?sequence=1