

**A PERSPECTIVE ON  
THE OUTCOMES OF THE  
REGIONAL ROUNDTABLES  
AT THE 17 OCTOBER  
2015 HIGH-LEVEL POLICY  
FORUM IN PRETORIA,  
SOUTH AFRICA**

ACCESS • INNOVATION • COLLABORATION

**Higher Education for the Sustainable Future  
We Want. The Way Ahead for Online, Open and  
Flexible Learning: Opportunities and Actions**

The [2030](#) Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations in September 2015 recognizes learning as an engine for individual, social, and economic development, articulating 17 goals, one of which states: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. The targets associated with this goal emphasize access, equity, quality, affordability, skills for employment, literacy, and the skills to promote sustainable development – for all levels of education from pre-primary to university and include both formal and informal approaches to education.

Within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the High-Level Policy Forum was organized by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), UNESCO, the Commonwealth of Learning, and the Open Education Consortium. The Forum was hosted by the University of South Africa (UNISA) in Pretoria the day after the International Council for Open and Distance Education 26<sup>th</sup> World Conference in October 2015, and is the third leg of a systematic, three-part process, which included very productive forums in Bali (2014) and Paris (2015).

One hundred and thirty leaders from higher education, governments, non-governmental organizations, associations, international organizations, and global and regional networks gathered to identify, on a regional basis, how to turn online, open and flexible education’s potential contribution to sustainable development into action and change. And the High-Level Policy Forum in Pretoria did indeed accomplish that.

### **International Challenges: Regional Action**

The stage for the Pretoria High-Level Policy Forum on the potential roles of online, open, and flexible learning for sustainable development has been set at a number of recent international events, at which ICDE, UNESCO and many other partners and organizations present in Pretoria have played central roles.

For example, at the World Education Forum, in Incheon Korea in May 2015, the conclusions highlighted the importance of flexible learning pathways and the use of information and communications technologies. The Qingdao, China International Conference on ICT and Post-2015 Education set an ambitious agenda for the use of ICT, including mobile learning and open and online solutions.

At previous High-Level Policy Forums, organized by ICDE and UNESCO in Bali and Paris, resulting declarations have focused on equity, access and quality for online learning, as well as calling on governments to provide effective policies, regulations and funding to support institutions, academics and students and for innovations in higher education.

In Pretoria, the work was to convert the goals and aspirations expressed in previous meetings into specific plans for action and change. The ideas and impetus generated by the International Council for Open and Distance Education 26<sup>th</sup> World Conference, which immediately preceded the Forum, invigorated and inspired the discussions.

The High-Level Policy Forum focused on the issues and possible actions at a regional level, with participants working together in regional groupings from Africa, Asia, South America, Europe, and North America. Each group analyzed key regional issues and outlined actions they could take collectively and independently to address these concerns. These discussions revealed key regional priorities and strategies, but they also contained a strong sense of cohesion. Across different regions, similar challenges call for actions and solutions that reflect their specific context. Together, the proposed actions

also present a broad international agenda for action, with the on-the-ground approaches designed to address regional, national, and local circumstances.

### Ten Strategic Initiatives Reflecting Regional Realities

At six regional roundtables, participants shared perspectives and developed a list of issues and actions related to online, open, and flexible education and their contributions to sustainable development. From these reports, ten key themes emerged from the reports of each group's discussion, signalling the intent and directions of actions to be undertaken.

#### ADVOCACY

Open and distance learning are not accepted as equal to face-to-face learning by governments, institutions, students, employers or the public in many parts of the world. All the regional roundtables stated that those engaged in this work need to be active advocates for online learning, using specific strategies suited to their circumstances, including political action, networks dedicated to explaining and encouraging online and open learning, exemplary practice, supporting champions, or enhanced promotion of achievements.

The evidence base which demonstrates the effectiveness of online learning needs to be front and centre in this advocacy work. Sustainable development can be intertwined with advocacy by, as one group recommends, a regional programme on education and research for sustainability that promotes the use of sustainable forms of education.

#### FUNDING

The need for adequate and sustainable funding was fundamental to many of the activities outlined in the regional roundtables and appropriate funding is also an acknowledgement of the essential role of online and open education in higher education, whether formal, informal or part of lifelong learning. In addition, some of the regional roundtables recommended that funding needs to demonstrated equal consideration for online and face-to-face or contact education, providing, for example, not only brick and mortar buildings, but also technological infrastructure.

Increased and reliable funding from governments is the goal of many of the actions outlined in the roundtables – whether activities in advocacy, research, or collaboration. With sufficient funding from government achieved, participants would focus on ensuring that funding within institutions supported all teaching, learning, and operational aspects of open and online learning.

#### STUDENT ACCESS, EQUITY, SUCCESS, and FLEXIBILITY

To work towards equity of access and success requires action to make education affordable and to increase enrolment numbers, targeting the under-served groups in each region. As well, more work is necessary to provide the presence of strong student support infrastructures and the application of a belief in lifelong learning with policies and practices that stress inclusion.

One regional roundtable cautioned against being massive rather than democratic in terms of access, to avoid having the benefits accrue to already advantaged groups. The use of the dual mode institutions and delivery models as a way of increasing registration and graduation was proposed; other strategies looked to continuous enrolment, short courses, integrating work with study options, and recognition of prior learning to increase access and success. Attention to gender and gender mainstreaming was recognized as essential for equity. The need for

funding to support risk-taking innovations in access and equity was stressed, so that all institutions can serve groups such as the unemployed and refugees.

Student flexibility and mobility garnered attention, with policies for credit acceptance and transfer, including a Transnational Qualification Framework, as essential action items.

### **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

To strengthen quality and quality assurance policies and practices, a detailed agenda of actions was outlined in various regional roundtables:

- Define the meaning of 'quality' for all stakeholders, in response to real demands, and determine where open and online learning can play a role.
- Create and/or expand communities of practice that share best practices.
- Promote an inclusive and integrated discussion in the regions about quality assurance, considering both public and private sectors, with a focus on influencing regulatory systems.
- Develop quality assurance guidelines for teaching and learning, research, and operations.
- Align definitions of quality according to educational sectors, rather than use a one-size-fits-all approach. This does not imply a lessening of standards for open or online learning, but a shaping of standards to allow equivalent measures, between contact and distance education.
- Work with national quality assurance agencies to adjust the criteria so that they fit non-traditional models, such as open, online, and flexible learning, and encourage rather than stifle innovation.

### **STUDENT VOICE**

The necessity of integrating student realities, views, and experience in planning and delivery of sustainable education brought forward a number of propositions for concrete actions:

- Integrate the profiles of current students, as well as those of target groups, into the design of the curriculum and delivery methods.
- Establish a culture and a process of engagement for current and potential students.
- Track student progress and success during and beyond their studies, applying the results to policies and actions in support of access, retention, intervention, and graduation.
- Integrate students into academic and governance committees.

### **OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES**

Reliable and affordable access to resources has a positive impact on online learning. Among the actions to provide these resources are:

- Provide information and communications technologies infrastructure that reflects sustainable costs and adequate materials according to the specific needs and capacities of each educational environment.
- Provide adequate bandwidth, coverage, and affordability, particularly in rural and poorer areas.
- Focus on 'assembling' rather than creating courses, using open educational resources and learning materials from a variety of courses.

- Develop and/or offer open education resources for no-cost textbooks and learning materials.
- Build regional MOOCs, reflecting local content and needs.

### **BROADBAND AVAILABILITY**

An issue that resonated with regional groups around the world, whether from developed or developing countries, was the importance of a strong technological backbone, anchored by the provision of adequate bandwidth, coverage, and affordability, particularly in rural and poorer areas.

One group recommended the provision of free Internet access to all, as a component of 21<sup>st</sup> century citizenship.

### **FACULTY TRAINING AND SUPPORT**

Every region brought forward essential actions to encourage the involvement of faculty in open, online and flexible learning and to support their effective teaching. Delegates looked to the provision of training on course and curriculum design, as well promotion and rewards systems that put the emphasis on teaching excellence and innovation. Institutional recognition of student-centred learning, which integrates broad skills and personal development, and teaching and learning achievements in distance and open education are essential to encourage faculty change.

### **RESEARCH AND INNOVATION**

The necessity of research and innovation to improve and promote online, open, and flexible learning resulted in action commitments from all regions, including:

- Invest in and develop the scholarship of teaching and learning in online and distance education.
- Build research capacity to inform and evaluate policy development and implementation.
- Develop research to inform the convergence of contact-based and distance delivery in order to optimize synergy.
- Support research on sustainable pedagogical models that increase enrolment, assure quality, and shift faculty workloads.
- Promote open data gathering on the use of online, open, and flexible learning to substantiate quality and achievements.
- Support grounded invention and innovation to enhance current practice and ensure sustainable development.

### **COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT**

All of the regional roundtables outlined active collaboration with partners that reflected their specific needs and environments. The partnerships have institutional, regional, national, or international scope, and implicate both private and public partners.

The outlined partnerships involve the shared development and implementation of policy, delivery models, capacity building for faculty, open journals, and virtual research centres, as well as integration of these efforts with international bodies such as UNESCO. The joint development of open educational resources received considerable attention at many of the regional roundtables. The sharing of costs, expertise, and experience supports the sustainability of higher education.

## COMMITMENTS TO ACTION

The participants in a number of the regional roundtables committed to working together to convert their outlined actions into reality. The representatives of one region at the High-Level Policy Forum and the ICDE Conference agreed that they could foster the adoption of the actions they outlined, working “in collaboration and within an agreed, shared agenda on a selection of topics.” Another stated that: “It is up to us to shape the future of education. We must act to ensure that this future is open, relevant, efficient and effective. We must model the behaviours we seek to realize and maintain a clear focus and constant effort. Complacency is not an option.”

To ensure that higher education contributes its maximum efforts to the Sustainable Development Goals, institutions should closely monitor the development of government policies in support of these goals. Education is recognized as an essential component of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), but as only one part of the response. The SDGs “are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental”. Improvements in education need to be matched with job development, human rights, and a healthy and secure planet. Governments have to embrace their responsibilities and accountability through not only resources, but also policy shifts and social initiatives.

## BEYOND “BUSINESS AS USUAL”

Now that higher education and life-long learning are recognized as key strategic investments for achieving the sustainable development goals, “business as usual” and “more of the same” are not likely to lead to success. New and creative uses of open and distance education, flexible learning and open education resources are means by which new levels of performance of higher education can be achieved. Now is the time for action.