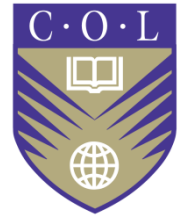


# Developing the Community: The Role of Universities and Open and Distance Learning

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## Abstract

*Building a well-developed community is a formidable but necessary challenge for many nations. An ideal community should fulfil all economic, social, material and spiritual needs of each and every one of its members; and meeting this end requires educated, skilled and competent people. From this angle, it is clear that education is an essential instrument in any community development strategy.*

*With the increasing impact of globalisation, community development has also come under the purview of universities. As nations race towards creating knowledge-based economies, it has become even more important to equip people with higher education as a means to further enhance the quality of human capital. Resultantly, universities have had to evolve with the needs of the community – through programmes, infrastructures, delivery methods, technologies and philosophies that can reflect the community's demands and attitudes. Open and distance learning (ODL) is one such response in this evolutionary process; an innovative approach that has allowed for an unprecedented number of people to attain new knowledge through university education, thereby adding value to the community development process. Lifelong learning, encompassed in ODL, is also a vital concept in community development – through short courses, professional training and the like; productive members of the community have a flexible and convenient opportunity for self-development and career advancement.*

*This paper will examine the role of universities in community development as well as explore the contribution of ODL in enriching the community's knowledge potential by creating an equitable, flexible and democratised access to higher education through which many major issues like the digital divide and gender disparity can be addressed. For many developing countries under the Commonwealth flagship, this is indeed a significant and positive turn. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) as an intergovernmental organisation that champions open access to education is also in itself an important*

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*enabler for Commonwealth countries. By leveraging on technologies and forging a concrete link between universities and communities through ODL and with the support of COL may perhaps pave for a new way to advance human capital and shape an optimistic future for all communities worldwide.*

## 1. Introduction

Any nation desires for its people to live in a progressive, stable and peaceful community – one that is economically, socially, materially and spiritually complete as well as able to contribute to the country's well-being. Cavaye (2006) contends that the community is both the means and end of community development. Indeed, holistic participation of the community in its development is essential to ensure that the community itself can become more vital, improved and can make better decisions in utilising resources, labour, knowledge, infrastructure, environments and financial capital. Communities are the 'grassroots' for a country; they are its building blocks, its foundations; they can depict its attitudes and drive its progress – and this is why creating the best environment for community development and encouraging good strategies are an integral part of a country's agenda.

The notion of development suggests more than just growth (Cavaye,ibid.). When we speak of growth, we may mean more jobs, more schools, more infrastructure and et cetera. However, the term development indicates an actual improvement in conditions, e.g. better healthcare, less environmental damage, better living conditions and better investment for the good of the community. This, I believe, is an important thing to understand: that the idea of community development means that the community engages itself in a process to improve its own economic, social and environmental status.

Central to this effort is the need for human capital – people with the right frame of mind, the right attitude and most importantly, people with the ability to use education and knowledge to create this public good. In addressing the 15<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Commonwealth Education Ministers in 2003, the venerable Professor Amartya Sen spoke of the need to address human insecurities through basic education. Even in its most basic form, education (or rather the lack of it) influences people's ability to understand and communicate; it creates barriers where there should not be and it can seriously impinge on a country's ability to participate in a global economy. Illustrating the importance of educating people, Professor Sen chose to quote Japan's Fundamental Code of Education:

“No community with an illiterate family, nor a family with an illiterate person.”

This Code, issued in 1872, is a remarkable declaration of the importance of educating a community, and indeed, an entire nation. Not only is this vital for Japan, but making education the foundation for a community development strategy should be a target for every single country.

This paper will examine how higher education contributes to the community development process and will also explain the role of open and distance learning (ODL) in fostering development and enriching the community's knowledge potential, particularly in today's knowledge-driven, globalised and borderless world. Among the issues discussed include the existence of the digital divide; equitable access to university education; gender disparity in education; university-community collaboration; the establishment of mega universities; and how universities can leverage on technology, including e-

learning. The importance of lifelong learning as a pillar for human capital development is also examined. In addition, this paper will explore how the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has impacted the progress of ODL in the Commonwealth and how the future of higher education and community development will be shaped by an open audience to learning and education. It is also in this context that knowledge-sharing is given emphasis, particularly within the Commonwealth countries.

## 2. Role of Universities in Community Development

Within the last decade or so, several buzzwords that are often heard include ‘globalisation’, ‘knowledge-based economy’ and ‘human capital development’. A central theme amongst all these buzzwords is the need for a country to grow, develop and compete in a world that necessitates the ability to actively participate in the global economic environment. It may be simplistic to say that any nation unprepared for this environment will be left behind, but it will also be unwise to undermine the significance of a nation’s economic participation in light of such borderless and fast-paced exchanges.

The United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP’s) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), almost a decade-old today, were introduced to address eight major issues, i.e. poverty and hunger, basic education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, diseases, environmental sustainability and the Global Partnership for Development. These goals are both “global and local” (UNDP, n.d.) – signifying their relevance at all societal and authoritative levels. Specifically, the MDG educational objective is to ensure universal primary enrolment, a target that is still a struggle for many developing nations. Countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Niger and Djibouti still report a net enrolment ratio below 50 per cent (UNDP, 2010). Nevertheless, UNDP reported a worldwide average of 88 per cent in 2007, indicative of a positive growth for most other nations. As we march further into the second decade of the new millennium, assuring continuity for individuals with basic education and coping with ever-growing demands at a national level are challenges that now fall on higher education.

Universities are the place for knowledge generation – knowledge for the good of the public; knowledge that can drive and transform the community. Kamallesh Sharma, the current Secretary-General for the Commonwealth of Nations, has put it plainly enough (2010):

“An overarching truth is that universities have been at the core of the development of societies.”

The World Bank, in its 2000 report, states that higher education is a public interest; it can improve individual and societal lives, raise wages and productivity, bring cultural and political benefits as well as encourage independence and initiative. Further advantages for the community also include a better trained workforce, better tax streams, shelter, healthcare and improved national output. By unlocking the community’s potential, universities help knowledgeable and talented people to gain advanced training and develop human capital into a key national resource. Through a university education, individuals can play a real part in creating an environment that will drive economic progress in their own communities.

Today, communities need universities and higher education more than ever before. Universities serve the people; they advise governments in policymaking decisions; they help develop skills, create knowledge

and train leaders. They are at the centre of crucial research, through which a country can stimulate innovations as well as attract foreign investments and engage in scholarly and scientific commerce. When universities are given the opportunity to thrive, they can also help to promote an open, modern, civil, tolerant and democratic community – for it is only through higher education that deeper ethical and moral values can be inculcated.

In essence, the role of universities in community development is to create a sense of equity for all individuals within that community. The MDGs notwithstanding, global pressures, e.g. rising inflation and unemployment, omnipresent issues of disparity and the digital divide have made the need for equity even more colossal. In the long run, it will prove vital for every single member of the community to have the opportunity to seek education and gainful employment, just as it is important to ensure that the community has access to basic social needs like housing, healthcare and nutrition.

The problem of digital divide, in particular, is worrying for many parts of the Commonwealth. While several of the Commonwealth countries have attained developed status, e.g. United Kingdom (UK), Australia, New Zealand and Canada, many others are still deprived and economically weak. The sheer diversity in the Commonwealth – from geography to economics – means that a majority of these countries still have a long way to achieve technological advancement portrayed by the abovementioned nations. The table below indicates the status of several selected Commonwealth countries.

Table 1: Internet Penetration Rates and ICT Index Scores for Selected Commonwealth Countries

Country	Internet Penetration (% Of The Population)*	World Bank ICT Index Scores**
Australia	80.1	8.67
Bangladesh	0.4	1.53
India	6.9	2.49
Kenya	10.0	2.41
Malaysia	64.6	7.14
Mauritius	22.4	6.23
Mozambique	2.8	1.27
Pakistan	10.4	3.39
Rwanda	4.1	0.64
Sierra Leone	0.3	0.55
South Africa	10.8	4.45

Sri Lanka	8.3	2.98
United Kingdom	82.5	9.45
*Updated as at 30 June 2010 from Internet World Stats.		
**The ICT index is a simple average of normalised scores on three variables, i.e. telephone, computer and internet penetration (per 1000 persons). Updated July 2009 by the World Bank.		

It is clear that the digital divide is still wide. Outside the Commonwealth, an advanced European country like Sweden reports a 92.5 per cent internet penetration rate and an ICT Index score of 9.66, well ahead of many of the poorer Commonwealth nations. This divide is severe not only between the developed nations and the developing ones, but within any particular country, there remains technological haves and have-nots. For instance, Malaysia as a nation demonstrates relatively good internet and telephone penetration, but statistics are more likely to represent the more affluent and urban areas. Some rural and remote areas within Malaysia are still far behind in terms of internet and broadband access.

The digital divide needs to be transformed into digital equity, for this will be a requisite to achieve educational equity for the community. Today's educational trend, especially through an approach like open and distance learning (ODL), leverages on technologies to deliver and complement academic programmes. Without commensurate technological infrastructure, the poor will remain deprived of both education and development. The investment in technologies is an imperative and will be the first step for many nations before they can truly progress in education.

An equitable education also involves enhancing the quality of the workforce. It is necessary for the workforce to be imbued with knowledge and skills relevant to the current environment. Equitable access must thus also encompass access to quality education. At the higher education level, this is particularly pertinent. If universities attest their function as the grounds for knowledge creation, then the knowledge must also attest to be useful to their students, and at a larger scale, beneficial to the country. Therefore, educating the workforce has a direct impact on a country's economic output and the quality of life enjoyed by the community.

Gender disparity is also an important issue in achieving equity. An estimated two-thirds of the world's working hours are attributable to women (cited in Commonwealth Consortium for Education, 2006a); clearly women are a major component of the global workforce. However, women remain the repressed gender – 75 per cent of all adult women are illiterate and two-thirds of all children who never attend primary schools are girls (Commonwealth Consortium for Education, *ibid.*). Despite recent growth, the number of women attending universities in many Commonwealth countries remains dismal. In Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda, female enrolment constitutes below 40 per cent in each country (Gunawardena et al., 2004). Even in countries where females constitute more than half of all university enrolment, they are still underrepresented in essential fields like medicine and engineering.

In relation with this, a persistent issue for women is also to enhance their enrolment into universities. Attainment of higher education is a major factor for gender equality and for helping women

to be more industrious and informed members of the community. By obtaining a university education, women can be more economically productive, be socially and politically responsible and take part in decision-making processes in public policies (Assié-Lumumba, 2006). Providing equitable access for women must also be accompanied by organisational and curriculum change (Gunawardena et al., 2004); important facets in higher education that must be addressed for women to truly prosper within the community. Women's development is universally recognised as important. For the Commonwealth countries specifically, it is acknowledged that eradicating poverty, protecting and promoting human rights, strengthening democracy and gender equality are issues that are intrinsically interrelated (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2005). Without gender equality, it will certainly be very challenging for communities and countries to prosper.

So where do universities and higher education stand in this big picture? As asserted by Sharma (2010), universities are uniquely positioned between communities and governments – they are answerable to both. The suggestion made by the Global Alliance on Community-Engaged Research (2009) also appears pertinent: higher education institutions and communities must work together to create, mobilise and apply knowledge that are needed in managing and creating sustainable development initiatives – clearly words that hint at both the community and national interests in universities. In this drive towards community development and creating equity, countries must thus search for ways to ensure open access, encourage all members of the community to partake in education as well address any discrimination in the field of education itself.

### 3. Democratising Education Via Open And Distance Learning

The idea of providing equitable, flexible and democratised access to higher education is a direct concern as well as advantage for both communities and governments. Communities need people with education and knowledge to partake in developmental activities, and the government needs competitive and savvy communities that can collectively contribute to the country's well-being. It is within the purview of universities to help people and communities to gain more knowledge, be more educated and ultimately play their part in the country's drive towards progress. With many nations struggling to accommodate greater knowledge creation through university enrolment, higher education has had to diversify. ODL is a revolutionary approach in higher education that evolved with the premise of creating more opportunities for more knowledge, and hence, more educated communities. ODL has been able to allow an unprecedented number of people to attain higher education, and through this process, add value to community development.

The Commonwealth Education Ministers at their 2003 conference concurred that ODL will be a major medium for delivering education, and that it is integral to enhance access, ensure inclusion and provide equal opportunities, particularly for isolated and remote areas (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2003). At the 17<sup>th</sup> edition of the conference in 2009, Nicholas Burnett, Assistant-Director General to the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), remarked that education is a lifelong endeavour and a lifetime investment; that it should be made inclusive to ensure every cross-section of society has the opportunity to obtain it. Burnett (ibid.) also noted that countries must provide the opportunities for its people to upgrade competences and learn new skills. It is in this light that

countries looking to further boost socio-economic conditions and living standards have turned to ODL as an approach that can provide education and training needed to create a learning society; and hence, bring development to the community.

ODL centres on the idea that education should be open, accessible, flexible and equitable to anyone who seeks it. The very conception of distance learning was founded on the growing need for skills upgrading and retraining as well as the technologies that make it possible to teach and learn at a distance (Daniel, 2002). In higher education, ODL has provided a new way to provide and disseminate knowledge, particularly to working adults. These individuals have a very specific role to play in the community – as breadwinners for their own families and also as the most valuable participants in community development. When we speak of a community's ability to make better decisions regarding resources, labour, knowledge, infrastructure, environments and financial capital, we are also inherently looking at how educated that community, i.e. its working adults, are.

It is also widely recognised that working adults, who today make up the majority of ODL learners, are of a new, non-traditional type. As learners, they generally study on a part-time basis while juggling multiple personal and professional commitments and are inclined towards higher and continuing education for reasons that usually relate to career advancement. As such, ODL programmes tend to gravitate toward career-oriented or industry-driven subject matters, e.g. business administration, information technology, occupational health and safety and the like. Many ODL institutions also employ a blended or hybrid pedagogy; allowing learners to attend a minimal number of classes while doing most of their studying independently via an online platform, audio- and/or videocassettes, broadcasted television and radio programmes or other multimedia. This flexible learning arrangement is probably the most outstanding reason why ODL is an attractive mode of learning for working adults.

The most prominent offshoot of ODL is probably the establishment of mega universities. A term that was first coined by Sir John Daniel in 1994 to describe large institutions with over 100,000 students, most mega universities today are ODL practitioners or at least dual-mode universities. According to Daniel (1998), mega universities are important for higher education's future as they are uniquely capable of combining flexibility, quality, low cost and high volume needed for greater access to higher education. In many countries, not merely within the Commonwealth, mega universities represent the success stories of ODL in higher education – the extraordinary number of students that have been able to enrol into them is testimony to the rapid widening of access for many working adults to obtain higher education.

Mega universities can also be considered a success story for the Commonwealth. Out of about 60 universities that have attained the mega university status, almost 20 are located in Commonwealth states, out of which eight are located in India alone. Out of the 20, eight are open universities or ODL institutions (Table 2 below). There are many other up and coming open universities in the Commonwealth as well, e.g. Open University Malaysia (OUM) that has cumulatively enrolled over 94,000 learners; Open University of Sri Lanka with almost 25,000 students; National Open University of Nigeria with over 32,000 students; and Canada's Athabasca University with over 38,000 students enrolling each year.

Table 2: Mega Universities in the Commonwealth

University	Established	Enrolment*
Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan	1974	3.2 million
Indira Gandhi National Open University, India	1985	3 million
Bangladesh Open University, Bangladesh	1992	600,000
Dr B R Ambedkar Open University, India	1982	450,000
Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, India	1989	300,000
University of South Africa, South Africa	1873	250,000
Open University, United Kingdom	1969	203,744
Madhya Pradesh Bhoj Open University, India	1991	150,000
*Updated as at 7 August 2010 from Wikipedia.		

It is quite commonly recognised that ODL is used in community development efforts (UNESCO, 2002) – its open approach means that many more people, especially women and marginalised groups, can obtain a university education. The idea that many more people, background and creed notwithstanding, can be university learners and make greater contribution to their own communities involves the concept of inclusivity. “Every individual has unique needs and preferences that are particularly applicable to learning and training” (cited in Online Educa Berlin, 2010) and an inclusive educational environment means one that can recognise and accommodate all these different concerns. Typically marginalised groups and those with special needs must be given equal opportunities in education and have access to learning experiences that fit their requirements.

Achieving inclusivity in higher education is part and parcel of creating equity and providing open access to each and every individual who wants to learn. e-Learning, the anchor for any ODL operation, can be seen as an enabler for this to take place. For an ODL institution like OUM, a learner-friendly and learner-centred delivery method that focuses on e-learning as the central component in teaching and learning has led to two very significant things; one, it has thrown the doors wide open for a greater fraction of the community to attain tertiary education; and two, the e-learning platform allows an almost limitless room for innovation that can further promote inclusivity.

For a private university owned by a consortium of 11 Malaysian public universities, OUM offers several incentives for specific individuals in the community as an endeavour in corporate social responsibility (CSR). Good CSR, as asserted by Brown and Cloke (2009) promote initiatives that include good employee relations, community empowerment and educational awareness. Under the higher education sphere, CSR is still a relatively new concept but it can provide the opportunity for universities to explore their impact upon the broader society (Brown and Cloke, ibid.). OUM’s CSR-related initiatives mostly revolve around access and affordability. Senior citizens and the physically disadvantaged receive a 75 per



cent reduction in tuition fees, and OUM is also actively involved in offering academic programmes to in-service teachers, teachers in remote areas, members of the military and even prisoners.

In terms of learning materials, there are also audio books that have been designed for visually impaired learners. In addition, OUM is the first university in Malaysia to implement the flexible entry system (otherwise known as open entry), recognition of prior learning (RPL) and assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) in its admission processes – an initiative to encourage even those with only basic educational backgrounds or those with vast working experiences but only minimal credentials to enrol into academic programmes.

OUM reaches out to other nations by partnering with foreign institutions to offer its programmes abroad. Two of our Commonwealth partners are the Accra Institute of Technology (AIT) in Ghana and Villa College in the Maldives. AIT offers OUM postgraduate programmes in business administration and information technology, whilst Villa College conducts the university's undergraduate programmes in education. OUM has also collaborated with the Arab Open University in Bahrain, the University of Science and Technology in Yemen and its newest partner is the Eszterházy Károly College in Hungary that will begin offering OUM's postgraduate programmes in January 2011. A collaboration with the International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka, for the offering of the Bachelor of Nursing Science is also currently in the works.

In particular, OUM's programmes for in-service teachers and the collaboration with Villa College can highlight ODL's role in innovating pathways to a knowledge society by scaling up the quality for education for every member of the community. Teacher training is an important component of ODL as well as the country. Through ODL, in-service teachers can upgrade their qualifications without leaving their day jobs. The ODL mode allows them to study and attend classes on weekends and outside school hours. For many, this is a welcome opportunity to gain new knowledge, advance their careers and continue to play their role as educators.

In terms of learning materials, OUM's internet radio (known as iRadio), an in-house developed broadcasting system designed to complement the university's blended pedagogy, has also been adopted by the Ministry of Education Maldives (known as iRadio Maldives) and by the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) together with the Central Institute of Educational Technology in India (known as Umang on www). Via OUM's international arm, the university also conducts training programmes and short courses for professionals and government officials from various countries in South Asia and the Middle East, e.g. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. These international linkages exemplify how ODL can also be utilised for community development even across borders.

These initiatives are all part of OUM's motto of a "University for All" and the philosophy of a democratised education. It is heartening to think that these examples can illustrate how ODL and open universities can stimulate and add value to community development. The challenge for universities and ODL institutions alike is to leverage on the appropriate technologies and to constantly innovate to be more flexible and relevant. Equitable, accessible, inclusive and quality university education will depend on the universities' ability to match the needs of the government, private sectors and industries on the route towards strengthening the community. Diversifying academic offerings through new graduate

programmes, short courses, professional training, and et cetera will certainly have an impact on this worthwhile endeavour.

#### 4. Lifelong Learning: An Important Pillar For Human Capital Development

Paving the way towards democratised access to education means that community members, regardless of their creed, background, age, physical abilities or socio-economic status, have the opportunity to pursue university degrees or training programmes that would upgrade their competencies and skills. Better education for and within the community will hopefully mean a better environment for the country to compete in the global economy. It is in this sense that the enculturation of lifelong learning must become an important strategic focus for many developing Commonwealth countries. For every nation, it should be a national agenda and regarded as the third pillar for the nation's human capital development, after the school system and higher education.

Lifelong learning opportunities must be made available to the community to create knowledgeable, responsible and skilled individuals who can contribute to the nation's economy. In this light, lifelong learning as a national agenda is the concept that will drive the community to embrace learning as part of its lifestyle, thus helping the country to move into a higher level of development. Thus, all lifelong learning activities and programmes are integral in contributing towards the nation's goal to become more progressive. Lifelong learning must be placed in a position of equal stature as the other two pillars in the education system. Figure 1 shows lifelong learning as the third pillar of human capital development.

Figure 1: The Three Pillars of Human Capital Development

It is imperative that lifelong learning activities and programmes produce maximum impact on their target audience. In order to maximise the utilisation of valuable resources, it is crucial that lifelong learning activities and programmes be efficiently delivered. Effective coordination and consolidation must be established to ensure no overlapping and inefficient allocation of resources. Thus, it is critical that each ministry/agency in the country develops its own 'niche areas' and ensure that its clientele is efficiently served.

At the same time, creativity and innovation must be the principal ingredients in all the development initiatives. Lifelong learning activities and programmes must incorporate these elements in order to make a positive and meaningful contribution to the nation's socioeconomic agenda. Recognising that information and communication technology (ICT) is an enabler of lifelong learning, it is fundamental for activities and programmes to also leverage on ICT. This is timely given that many countries are currently driving to expand broadband penetration. This development will widen access to lifelong learning to the masses through a flexible, affordable and effective online learning mode. There is, however, the need to bridge the digital divide which will be a crucial agenda in the enculturation of lifelong learning.

#### 5. ODL And The Commonwealth Community

As an instrument of development, ODL has played a progressively major role in the Commonwealth community. The Commonwealth as a whole has pioneered the global ODL movement, beginning with the establishment of some of today's most prominent ODL practitioners, i.e. the University of South Africa, UK's Open University, India's Indira Gandhi National Open University, the Open University of Hong Kong and Canada's Athabasca University. The growth of ODL within the Commonwealth has also been tremendous; in 1988 there were only 10 open universities throughout all Commonwealth states and a decade later, there were almost 30 (Kanwar & Daniel, 2009). By 2006, some three million people in the Commonwealth were already engaged in some form of distance education (Commonwealth Consortium for Education, 2006b).

Through the Kampala Declaration of 2007 (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2007), all Commonwealth countries recognised that transforming societies for political, economic and human development will require nations to create an equitable society free from poverty, ignorance and disease. Apart from the MDGs, central to this effort will of course include higher education. Despite different levels of development, as well as historical factors and circumstances in every Commonwealth nation, development for any community still rests on "the foundations of democratic governance, the rule of law, respect for human rights, gender equality and peace and security" (Commonwealth Secretariat, *ibid.*). This inherently links to the role of universities in development; a role that I believe has been further bolstered through ODL.

At this juncture, I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge COL in helping all Commonwealth states to progress towards a well-developed community. As an intergovernmental organisation for all 54 of the Commonwealth member states, COL has orchestrated tremendous advances in education (particularly via ODL) for many of them. Since 1989, COL has been involved in hundreds of teaching and training programmes in over 40 countries, helped to establish open schools and universities, conducted seminars and studies, created networks for education and technology specialists as well as facilitated changes in the delivery of education in the member countries. With the help of the COL, there is now at least one distance learning operation in every Commonwealth country (Commonwealth Secretariat, *ibid.*). In fact, OUM is also one of the institutions that have been at the receiving end of COL's positive support.

For a worldwide association that brings together over 1.7 billion people, the Commonwealth certainly needs an organisation like COL to help promote ODL as a means to increase access to education, especially for the more disadvantaged communities under its flagship. As an example, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is a network that aims to do just that. As an organisation that promotes collaborative development of open resources and technologies to broaden educational access, the VUSSC's main focus areas include capacity building for content development, offering and managing various courses for its member countries and developing the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) as a quality assurance measure across the Commonwealth small states. In July 2010, OUM played host to 26 VUSSC senior officials for their TQF meeting, and the university is more than honoured to take part in the development of the TQF for this network under COL.

COL has also helped to establish ODL as an agent for development through education; and this is true even beyond formal schooling. One case in point is the Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3 Farmers) initiative, which is a COL programme designed to help farmers gain knowledge in order to improve their

own living conditions. Since its introduction in 2004, the L3 Farmers programme has been expanded to India, Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Kenya, Mauritius and Papua New Guinea. The learning needs for such a homogeneous group like farmers are so massive that conventional instruction cannot address the scale of the challenge to educate them.

This programme leverages on technology to build the elements of the L3 Farmers model, which are, to help assemble and organise farmers; provide information through a consortium; set up ICT kiosks as focal points; provide bank and financial support; assist in marketing produce; and finally, have an organisation, i.e. COL, to initiate the process (Daniel & Alluri, 2006). Without trainer-trainee communication, the programme has focused on using technologies like mobile telephones to assist in learning, exchange information and manage emergencies (Jakkamal, 2009). I believe this is a very laudable and impressive project – it proves that ODL is an important and viable means of educating people and transforming communities. The COL asserts that “learning is our common wealth”, and it has certainly proven to be vital for the good of the Commonwealth community.

## 6. The Way Forward: Open Education For The Community

Bank (2009) contends that technological trends in education will encourage a future where knowledge sharing is the norm. When there are tools and infrastructure for learning; free and open educational content and resources; and a culture of open access to information, collaboration and global sharing, there will also be opportunities for human learning. Bank (ibid.) opines that the central requirement for this is the Web and proposes a “WE-ALL-LEARN” framework designed around the idea that the Web will be the future of knowledge sharing and open access to education. The ten openers for this framework are:

- Web Searching in the World of e-Books;
- e-Learning and Blended Learning;
- Availability of Open Source and Free Software;
- Leveraged Resources and OpenCourseWare;
- Learning Object Repositories and Portals;
- Learner Participation in Open Information Communities;
- Electronic Collaboration;
- Alternate Reality Learning;
- Real-Time Mobility and Portability; and
- Networks of Personalised Learning.

The reason that I have cited Bank in this paper is to stress on the idea that new technologies and ensuing forces like ODL and mega universities are going to have an even greater impact in the future of higher education and community development. The “WE-ALL-LEARN” framework proposed by Bank is a good place to start to generate even greater learning opportunities for as many people as possible.

In his book, Bank also outlines what he calls “audiences of the open world”, i.e. the people who would have a vested interest in learning. Bank mentions, amongst others, parents, children, teachers, trainers, school and university administrators and government agencies as part of this audience who will be able to

learn from limitless Web resources that are now within arm's reach of virtually anyone and at any time. In the context of this paper, this audience encompasses the community in its entirety. Education that is freely and openly available to anyone who seeks it will pave the way for further progress within the community – the Internet, online learning and ODL will certainly make this an even greater reality in the future. The learning community of tomorrow will positively be an open one.

So, how do universities and ODL institutions play their part in creating this open community? What has often been propagated is that institutions should wisely leverage on technologies, but any institution looking to create greater access and equity could scrutinise how Open University UK has used technologies as a tool to link the community with knowledge dissemination. These have general aims such as to (adapted from Daniel, 1998):

- Improve teaching effectiveness and learning productivity;
- Reinforce the sense of an academic community;
- Deliver courses that are relevant and beneficial; and
- Provide efficient service to large numbers of learners.

Sir John Daniel's take on Open University's technological initiatives can be looked at as success factors for the institution and ODL at large. In order to achieve equity and encourage the pursuit of quality education across all sections of the community, the Open University has proven that ODL and online learning are the key elements for the creation of an open education for all members of society. This, I believe, will continue to be very salient factors for both university and community development.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

Higher education and universities will always be relevant for educating the people through knowledge creation and dissemination. Their role in expanding, diversifying and adding value to the functions of the community will not become obsolete despite various global concerns. However, it is also important to bear in mind that universities, communities and governments are linked – the development of the community depends on the ability of universities to continue providing the opportunities for higher education that is relevant, equitable and with real benefits for the country. ODL as a new wave in higher education is an innovative way that has allowed massive numbers of people to discover new knowledge and improve the conditions within their own communities.

In the light of ever-increasing impact of globalisation, universities and higher education have become even more relevant for the development of the individual, community and country. For the community to thrive, educational opportunities must be made equitable so that all members of the community can gain the education they need to improve their lives and participate in the development of that community. I spoke of the MDGs and I truly believe that without the right human capital, i.e. those with adequate and appropriate education, achieving the MDGs will be a very difficult task.

For universities and higher education, modern challenges are quite extensive, e.g. the growing influence of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), issues in intellectual property rights, and how private entities can support community development through a newfound avenue like CSR. An ODL

institution like OUM has experimented with CSR-based initiatives to encourage more people to enrol into higher education programmes. Commonwealth countries are fortunate to have COL as a driving force to assist us in our endeavours, and through its efforts, universities and ODL institutions can certainly stamp their mark in the creation of an open education community. A democratised access to higher education is an important agendum in community development, and I anticipate the role of ODL in this endeavour will continue to be a crucial one in the years to come.

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