

**ODL and Cross-Border Higher Education in the Commonwealth:  
Who is offering it, and why? Who is studying in this way, and why?  
What are the key challenges and solutions?**

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**Overview**

There are many students, in many countries, enrolled in ODL programmes originating from countries other than their own. Such programmes are often enriching and rewarding experiences for students and programme providers, though sometimes they are not. These two sessions will be an opportunity to explore cross-border ODL in some depth, with particular emphasis on Commonwealth experience.

Four key questions will structure the discussions.

1. Who is offering cross-border ODL, and why?
2. What subjects and programmes are covered?
3. Who is studying in this way, in what countries, and why?
4. What are the key challenges and are there good solutions?

The aims are fourfold:

- (a) to share experiences to mutual benefit
- (b) to raise awareness of the development possibilities offered by cross-border ODL amongst those unfamiliar with its potential
- (c) to identify key challenges and some solutions
- (d) to consider next steps

The two sessions will be closely linked, but very different in character. Session 1 will include a number of presentations, giving an overall picture of contemporary practice, illustrating this with some examples, and setting out some issues. There will be ample time for questions. Session 2 will be in workshop mode, with participants working in groups on challenges and solutions, and identifying next steps.

**Session 1**

This session will be 90 minutes long, and will have three kinds of input:

- 1.1. An overview, to set the scene and frame the debate (15 minutes)
- 1.2. Some examples, drawn from different Commonwealth countries (40 minutes)
- 1.3. The quality challenge and the UNESCO portal (10 minutes)

Each speaker will bring out key challenges from their perspectives and comment on any solutions that have worked for them. There will also be 20-25 minutes for questions and comments. All the issues which arise will be logged in preparation for session 2.

The session will be introduced and chaired by Prof. Ann Floyd, of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, and chair of its Distance Learning Committee.

**1.1 An overview:** after a brief introduction, this session will begin with an overview of cross-border ODL, with particular reference to the Commonwealth. This presentation will give a good sense of some of the challenges (questions 1 and 2, and aspects of 3 and 4). This will set the scene for subsequent presentations and discussions.

The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education has been monitoring all forms of cross – border higher education since its inception, and its founding director, Ms Svava Bjarnason, will give this overview, speaking for about 15 minutes.

**Svava Bjarnason ‘Opportunities and Challenges for Cross-Border ODL, with particular reference to the Commonwealth’**

*She writes: The Commonwealth has a rich history of open and distance learning beginning with the University of London’s External Programme and including the successes of the Open Universities in the UK, India and South Africa amongst others. While some of these initiatives came about to reach learners within the country of origin, almost all (if not all) now extend their reach regionally and globally. The number of learners engaged in ODL is staggering as the ‘mega-universities’ continue to grow worldwide. However, the challenges and opportunities facing ODL are becoming increasingly complex and global in nature.*

*Technology has changed dramatically in the past decade, as has the sophistication and expectation of learners. How are providers changing their delivery mechanisms, particularly in emerging economies, to address these changes? Expanding recruitment to learners beyond national borders often means embracing new partnerships (both public and private) which raises issues such as coping with different regulatory regimes, ensuring quality of provision and recognition of awards (amongst others). This presentation will provide a context for the session’s discussions by setting out some of the challenges and opportunities for cross-border ODL in the coming years.*

**1.2. Three examples, from different parts of the Commonwealth:** there are of course many more examples than it is possible to include here. It is hoped that other institutions will be able to bring their experiences and insights to bear as well, both in their comments and questions in this session, and through their inputs into Session 2.

In this first session short presentations will be given about UNISA (University of South Africa), IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University, India), and the schemes sponsored by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK.

**UNISA’s experiences will be summarised by Professor Narend Baijnath.**

*He writes: Repositioning Unisa in the post-apartheid higher education (HE) landscape has impelled rethinking of many issues central to the role of a university in a developmental context: inequitous patterns of access and participation, legacies of colonialism and apartheid and their impact on HE, inadequate resourcing, fledgling capacities, and evolving regulatory/quality assurance arrangements, for instance. While these material realities are ascribed to the South African context, many are pervasive on the African continent. Unisa’s role as a cross-border provider is therefore shaped and influenced by a concern for social justice on the African continent, as much as it is in South Africa. Because of Unisa’s experience and capacities in ODL, a burgeoning number of new ODL institutions look to Unisa for partnerships which help in capacity development, use of Unisa materials and courseware, and access to Unisa’s facilities and infrastructure. At the same time, there is a huge demand for study opportunities with Unisa, fuelled in some measure by subsidy of the costs by the SA government, and in another (e.g. Zimbabwe, Ethiopia) by Unisa itself. This presentation will focus on Unisa’s experience in operating in diverse political and economic jurisdictions. In particular, attention will be given to how opportunities are leveraged, followed upon and consolidated through diverse partnership strategies. It will illuminate how students are supported, and how barriers are overcome. Challenges associated with operating in complex, diverse cultural and political settings will also be addressed.*

### **IGNOU's experiences will be summarised by Professor Omprakash Mishra:**

He writes: *"Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), established in 1985, extended its outreach beyond the borders of the country, after ten years of successful attainment of its mandate and objectives. The system has attracted learners by its unique features such as relaxed entry schedule, flexibility of time and space, its cost effective quality education, need-based professional courses and contextualized course-curriculum. At present, IGNOU presence can be seen in 32 countries having partnership arrangement with 49 educational institutes. The presentation focuses on what, why and how of IGNOU's international operations.*

*IGNOU has an assortment of partners. In Gulf countries the higher education is mostly in the private hands whereas in Maldives, Seychelles and in Mauritius, the partnership is governed by an agreement with Governments. Other partners are public and private education institutes and intra-governmental organizations, like Commonwealth of Learning, UNESCO, South Africa Development Community, etc. IGNOU has kept its options open with the choice of partners and the emphasis is on the experience and the quality of the education provider.*

*Under its PAN-Africa tele-education initiative, IGNOU has taken a leading role in offering its academic programmes in Ethiopia through dedicated optical fibre F2F tele-education.*

*Approximately 11,000 students have been registered from various countries and the number is ever increasing. These students are mostly from the Indian Diaspora but there are also many African students. Female student percentages are approximately 38% and the programmes preferred are BCA, MCA, MBA, BED and BDP.*

*The IGNOU intends to establish collaboration and partnership with government agencies, open universities, and international organisations. Some partnerships that are already in place are with UNESCO, Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and World Health Organisation (WHO).*

*The University is working on plans for creating online services for efficient and timely feedback to the learners, online delivery of academic programmes, increasing more partnership fronts, more involvement of core faculty, proactive need assessment, and establishment of international resource centre and on-line capacity building of counsellors." These developments derive from our experiences so far, and the presentation will focus on the challenges we have encountered and the solutions we are developing.*

### **The experience of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK (CSC UK) will be summarised by Dr Hilary Perraton.**

He writes: *The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the United Kingdom has been offering conventional scholarships and fellowships since 1960 but in 2002, following an earlier experimental project in Canada, began providing distance-learning scholarships. From its establishment the commission has looked for postgraduate scholars who are academically strong and who will benefit their home countries once they have graduated; these criteria continue to apply to its distance-learning programme. We have funded groups of students in, for example, master's programmes in education at the Institute of Education in London, agricultural development through Wye College, now part of the School of Oriental and African Studies, and computer science at Sunderland university among others, having established that the courses are relevant to the needs of the countries in which they are being offered. Our six years of experience has yielded valuable lessons about the practicalities of crossborder learning.*

*The Commission's first, and largest, tranche of funding has gone to schemes based on a partnership between a British and an overseas university. We were looking for two things in these partnerships: a means of providing local student support and the chance of fostering institutional development in the overseas university. In practice they have developed in widely different ways which we will discuss at the forum. The Commission has gone on to fund a limited number of scholarships without partnership arrangements and will be evaluating the comparative merits of the two approaches. We have funded some programmes in which scholars spend one term studying full-time in Britain while completing the rest of their degree part-time and at a distance over about two years.*

*We'll look at three key policy issues: how do the costs work out, and who is going to pay them? What are the conditions of success for partnerships? What about face to face support – should courses have a residential component, and if so, where should it be?*

**1.3: The quality challenge and the UNESCO portal:** one of the key challenges for prospective students is obtaining good information about the quality of the institutions in which they are considering enrolling. As part of its work on cross-border higher education and quality assurance, UNESCO is developing a portal which aims to offer useful guidance in this area. Ms Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic, (Section Head, Reform, Innovation and Quality Assurance) will outline the challenges UNESCO is aiming to address with this initiative

**Ms Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic, 'Guiding Learners in new Higher education Spaces: what role for UNESCO?'**

*She writes: The pace of change in higher education is accelerating. Enrolment rates of around 40-50 % of the relevant age group are now thought necessary for a country to function well in a competitive and interdependent world. In 2004, there were 132 million students (including part time students) enrolled in tertiary education globally. A further massive increase in the demand for higher education can be expected as countries understand its role as a driver of development.*

*Learners are becoming a more diversified group. Traditional learners from the 18-22 age cohorts, who now have different and changing needs for flexibility and diversity in their studies, are being joined by new types of students. Life-long learners are a steadily growing group. They come not only from adult populations and working professionals but also from degree holders whose diplomas become obsolete and need updating to guarantee employment.*

*In response to this rapid growth in demand, there is an increasing diversity of providers. Tertiary education is becoming a marketplace with plenty of dubious providers, bogus institutions and degree mills offering fake or low quality degrees. Distance learning is a preferred mode for many of these dubious providers. Are there efficient ways to alert learners to these and help them make informed choices? How will students find their way around in a myriad of competing offerings? Learner protection and empowerment become crucially important. Assessing the quality of this diverse provision becomes a crucial issue*

*UNESCO has launched some initiatives aimed at protecting and guiding learners: the Guidelines on Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education, the Portal of recognised higher education institutions and other tools aimed at alerting students to bogus institutions. It responds to the theme of protecting young people by providing them access to reliable information to guide their life choices.*

*As part of the debate on cross-border higher education, the presentation will focus on the development of the Portal of recognized higher education institutions and some challenges it raises as a reliable tool for information sharing. The related challenge of degree mills and bogus institutions will also be addressed: how to develop suggestions for effective international practice as one of the responses to this growing problem, especially from the perspective of developing countries?*

Throughout this session, key points will be logged, in preparation for session 2. It is anticipated that these will include aspects of regulatory frameworks, the recognition of 'foreign' qualifications, the relevance of 'foreign' programmes to students' contexts, and the provision of in-country support for students, amongst others. Amongst the benefits are likely to be the broadening of international understanding, the chance to study topics not available in country, the chance to connect with students from other countries, and the opportunity for providers to broaden their own perspectives and develop new resources.

## Session 2

Session 2 will be in workshop format. The session will be in three parts.

- 2.1. Summary of the key points arising in session 1, by Dr Don Olcott (15 minutes)
- 2.2. Group discussions (40 -45 minutes)
- 2.3. Report back (15 - 20 minutes)
- 2.4. Comments by panel (the session 1 speakers)

**2.1. Key points arising from session 1:** this will serve three purposes. It will be a reminder for those who were in session 1, it will give enough of a flavour for any participants who were not at session 1, and it will set up the group discussions.

**2.2. Group discussions:** these will have a flexible structure and will focus on two aspects. One is discussion of challenges identified and possible solutions.

The other is next steps, which will be for two kinds of actor. One is CoL – what might it do to encourage/facilitate good practice? The other actors are workshop participants – what can individuals/their institutions do, and is there scope for working together?

**2.3. Report back.** Each group will have up to 5 minutes to summarise their key outputs.

**2.4. Comments by panel:** session 1 speakers will make any final observations they have.

The two workshop sessions and proposed timings are summarised in the table below.

<b>Session 1</b>		
5 minutes	Introduction	Prof Ann Floyd CSC
15 minutes	Framing the Debate	Dr Svava Bjarnason senior education specialist, International Finance Corporation.
40 minutes	Examples	UNISA : Prof. Narend Bajjnath ,Vice-Principal: Strategy, Planning & Partnerships  IGNOU: Prof. Omprakash Mishra, Pro-Vice-Chancellor  CSC: Dr Hilary Perraton, deputy chair.
10 minutes	A challenge and a solution: the UNESCO portal	Ms Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic, UNESCO
20 minutes	Challenges, benefits and experiences	General discussion
<b>Session 2</b>		
15 minutes	Summary of key points from session 1	Dr Don Olcott, Observatory on Borderless Higher Education
40-45 minutes	Challenges and solutions Next steps	Group discussion
15-20 minutes	Report back	
15 minutes	Comments	Panel