

# **Online, Open, and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: Policy Challenges**

A Background Report Prepared by the  
International Council of Open and Distance  
Education (ICDE) for the United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and Cultural  
Organization (UNESCO)

## Introduction

### **New goals, new commitments, Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all**

The [Incheon Declaration](#), guiding the global work on education, has been adopted at the [World Education Forum](#) held at Incheon, Republic of Korea from 19 to 22 May 2015. This Declaration is a major step forward, establishing a collective agenda for all countries and all sectors of education for the next 15 years. The Declaration will underpin the education targets in the Sustainable Development Goals that will be ratified at the United Nations in September 2015. Education is essential to achieving all of the new Sustainable Development Goals. It is necessary to eradicate poverty, boost shared prosperity and broad-based economic growth, and build peaceful, tolerant societies.

With the Incheon Declaration as the point of departure, more than 300 experts and representatives from UNESCO Member States met in Qingdao, China, at [the International Conference on ICT and Post-2015 Education](#) from 23 to 25 May 2015 and issued the **Qingdao Declaration**.

The [Qingdao Declaration](#), the first global declaration on ICT in education, provides Member States with policy recommendations about how to **effectively use ICT to address current educational challenges and to ensure equitable quality education and lifelong opportunities for all**. The Declaration is a clear statement in favour of the use of ICT to foster access and equity in education, as well as to promote the effective pedagogical use of ICT. It highlights in particular the paramount role that teacher development and support will have to play. It stresses that increasing efforts have to be made to promote the culture of open educational resources and the need to ensure quality assurance and recognition of online learning. Finally, it encourages governments, industry partners and all other education stakeholders to join forces and share resources to create equitable, dynamic, accountable, and sustainable learner-centered digital learning ecosystems.

**In October - November 2015, the “Framework for Action for Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all” will be agreed among the UNESCO Member States and create that committed framework, which is necessary to have success in implementing the Education 2030 agenda.**

New technologies are the way to connect the dots across the new Education agenda – to connect education quality, equality and inclusion, reaching the unreached, and learning throughout life. The Global High-Level Policy Forum, organised by UNESCO in partnership with ICDE, at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France, 9–11 June 2015, has the Qingdao Declaration as a platform to further **seize digital opportunities, lead education transformation and develop concrete policy responses and a best practice framework for Online, Open, and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want.**

## Policy Background

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

Also in 2000, at the World Education Forum in Dakar, 164 governments agreed on the Dakar Framework for Action: [Education for All](#), comprising six key educational goals to meet the learning need of all children, youth and adults. UNESCO was asked to take the lead for this initiative and, as part of this responsibility, initiated the Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Reports.

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

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

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

To guide the progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals, the draft [“Framework for Action 2030: Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All”](#) contains three targets of particular interest for those involved with post-secondary education:

- Target 4.3: By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.
- Target 4.4: By 2030, increase by x% (TBD) the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

- Target 4.5: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

The policy initiative for “Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: From Statement to Action: Access, Equity, and Quality Learning Outcomes” is developed within this context.

The Global High-Level Policy Forum in Paris is part of this broad policy stream initiative, highlighted by three major events, organized by UNESCO, International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), and other partners to put forth effective policy recommendations to support the new goals and commitments of the post-2015 Global Education Agenda, **Education 2030**.

At the first event, the High-Level Policy Forum organized by ICDE, in partnership with UNESCO, in Bali in November 2014, higher education leaders from around the globe endorsed UNESCO’s proposed post-2015 Education Agenda. Agreeing that access to and success in open, online, and flexible learning are key solutions to the pressing challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the leaders produced the [Bali Message](#), broad policy recommendations for government, institutions and faculty.

The [Paris Global High-Level Policy Forum](#), organized by UNESCO in partnership with ICDE, continues to build on the Bali Message, by seeking to outline how to turn its statements into action. This Background Report, “Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: Policy Challenges”, has been conceived to guide the debates, as well as shape relevant policy and practice recommendations.

The final event of this policy stream is a High-Level Policy Forum to be organized by ICDE in partnership with UNESCO, The Commonwealth of Learning, and Open Education Consortium, in Pretoria on 17 October 2015, immediately after the ICDE World Conference and Presidents’ Summit. In preparation for this Policy Forum, institutions across the globe will be surveyed about how they offer online, distance, and open education. Supplemented by interviews with representatives of the five regions of the world (Africa; Arab States; Asia and the Pacific; Europe and North America; and Latin America and the Caribbean), the survey information will be presented in five regional reports, which will be used to facilitate regional and international discussions on online, open, and flexible education and learning in higher education.

## **The Background Report**

This Background Report, “Online, Open, and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: Policy Challenges”, has been prepared by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as groundwork for the upcoming Global High-Level Policy Forum in Paris, outlined above.

The Background Report includes two key components:

1. **Discussion Paper:** A discussion paper, examining the issues of **equity, access, and quality learning outcomes** was written to present specific issues, strategies, and opportunities for the future of higher education, in particular the possible contributions of online, open and flexible higher education. Throughout the paper, Questions for Consideration are posed to stimulate thought and consideration on some of the key issues to be discussed at the Paris Forum. The discussion paper, “Online, Open, and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: Discussion Paper”, which was sent to all those invited to take part in the Global High-Level Policy Forum in Paris, has been included in this Background Report.
2. **Survey Analysis:** A 15-question survey was distributed with the Discussion Paper to solicit opinions on strategies, benefits, challenges, and policy alternatives for online, open, and flexible learning in higher education. The Survey results have been analyzed and the report, entitled “What We Heard: Perspectives and Experiences from 105 Educational Leaders from 53 Countries” forms part of this Background Report.

“Online, Open, and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: Policy Challenges” will be distributed to all those invited to and attending the Global High-Level Policy Forum in Paris, as well as made available on UNESCO, ICDE, and other websites.

# SURVEY RESULTS

## What We Heard – Perspectives and Experiences from 105 Educational Leaders from 53 Countries

UNESCO's Division for Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems is organizing, in partnership with the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), a Global High-Level Policy Forum on "Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: From Statements to Action: Access, Equity, and Quality Learning Outcomes", to be held in Paris from June 9 to 11, 2015.

The Global High-Level Policy Forum brings together more than 140 leaders and decision-makers from education ministries, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, other relevant associations and organizations, and the educational technology industry from around the world. The outcomes will be a sustainable vision, strategic directions and clear policy responses in support of harnessing the potential of online, open, and flexible education to prepare students for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge society.

In preparation for this Forum, a Discussion Paper and Survey were sent to all of those invited, inviting them to share their perspectives and experiences prior to the Global High-Level Policy Forum in order to inform the discussions and lay the ground work for the policy recommendations and strategic actions to guide higher education post-2015.

"What We Heard: Perspectives and Experiences from 105 Educational Leaders from 53 Countries" details the responses to the Survey.

### Who We Heard From

#### Response Rate

The Survey was distributed to the 542 educational leaders who were invited to participate in the Paris High-Level Policy Forum. **One hundred and five (105) responses were received for a 19.4% responses rate.**<sup>1</sup>

**Two-thirds (66.7%) of the respondents indicate that they will be attending** the Paris Forum, with 33.3% indicating that they will not be in attendance, but offering their input to support the discussions.

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<sup>1</sup> In most cases, almost all of the respondents replied to each of the questions. Actual numbers of respondents will be reported only when there is a significant variation from this figure.

## Regional Representation

Responses were received from **53 countries** around the globe. The countries are grouped to correspond to UNESCO regions.

- Europe and North America
  - Belgium
  - Bulgaria
  - Canada
  - Cyprus
  - France
  - Germany
  - Hungary
  - Ireland
  - Israel
  - Italy
  - Montenegro
  - Netherlands
  - Norway
  - Poland
  - Romania
  - Russia
  - Spain
  - Sweden
  - Turkey
  - United Kingdom
  - United States
  
- Asia and the Pacific
  - Australia
  - Bangladesh
  - China
  - Fiji
  - India
  - Indonesia
  - Iran
  - Japan
  - Kazakhstan
  - Malaysia
  - Mongolia
  - Myanmar
  - New Zealand
  - Philippines
  - Republic of Korea
  - Sri Lanka
  - Turkey
  - Vietnam
  
- Africa:
  - Algeria
  - Gambia

- Kenya
- Malawi
- Nigeria
- South Africa
- Zimbabwe
  
- Arab States:
  - Algeria
  - Kuwait
  - Palestine
  - United Arab Emirates
  
- Latin America and Caribbean:
  - Argentina
  - Barbados
  - Brazil
  - Chile
  - Mexico

### **Professional Positions of Respondents**

Among those responding to the questionnaire, the **majority (58) are in executive management roles**, including Rector, President, Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Chairman, CEO, Vice President, and Provost. Twenty-two respondents have the title of Director and 12 indicated they are Professors. Ten (10) specified that they hold UNESCO Chairs; three hold ICDE Chairs. Other positions mentioned are Consultant, Researcher, Communications Officer, Chief of Staff, and Technology Expert.<sup>2</sup>

### **Organizational Affiliation**

Almost half of the respondents (47.1%) represent open or distance post-secondary institutions, while another 28.7% are from conventional or dual-mode post-secondary institutions. Representatives from associations, at 18.4%, are the third largest group.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A number of respondents included more than position title, indicating the multiple roles played by many of the invitees.

<sup>3</sup> A number of respondents represent more than one organizational type.

Which type of organization do you represent?	
Answer Options	Response Percent
Open or distance post-secondary institution	47.1%
Conventional/Dual Mode post-secondary institution	28.7%
Association	18.4%
Private Company	7.0%
Government	6.9%
Multi-National Agency	2.3%
Government Agency	1.1%

## Student Enrollment

Of the 78 post-secondary institutions and providers responding to this question, the greatest number (34) serve students through distance learning programmes. There are 26 responses from dual mode institutions and 18 from those with students registered on-site only.

The student numbers vary significantly, with one institution reporting 1.5 million students, while a few report numbers in the hundreds or low thousands. Nine (9) of the distance education institutions reported more than 100,000 registrants, which puts them in the category of mega universities.

Overall, more than 6,745,000 students are enrolled in the higher education institutions that responded to this Survey. In addition, an open educational resource cooperative reports more than 50,000 users daily and a private company offering hundreds of free short courses eligible for recognition reports five million registrants.

## Benefits, Challenges, and Barriers to the Adoption of Online, Open, and Flexible Learning

Respondents were asked to rate the significance of various **benefits, challenges, and barriers** for online, open, and flexible learning on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest score.

### Benefits

Clear groupings of the **significance of the benefits** emerge as the three top rated factors are linked to **pedagogy** – design, expanded offerings, and assessment – while the next rated three are tied to **access and equity** – student mobility, overall increases in enrollment, and increased

enrollment from under-represented groups. The next two focus on **teaching and management**; the last three link to **outcomes** – student satisfaction and results and faculty satisfaction.

It is clear that the new opportunities for teaching and learning and increased access offered by online learning are welcomed by the respondents. For example, 47 respondents rated “use of new pedagogical approaches” as a ‘5’ in significance; whereas only 14 gave a ‘5’ to “improvement in student results”.

**BENEFITS: How do you rate the significance of the benefits from online, open and flexible learning? Please rate out of 5 with 1 being the least and 5 as most important factor.**

Responses in Order of Significance	Rating Average
Use of new pedagogical approaches	4.38
New courses and programs made available	4.20
Use of new assessment and credentialing models	4.07
Increased international mobility and cross-border higher education	4.06
Increased enrollment overall	3.83
Increased enrollment from previously under-represented groups	3.82
Increase in quality of teaching and learning	3.74
Leadership and management change	3.66
Student reports of satisfaction with online learning	3.52
Improvement in student results	3.48
Faculty reports of satisfaction with online learning	3.41

Respondents suggest **additional benefits** from online, open, and flexible learning, linked to the theme of **access** - reaching lifelong learning students over age 25 and busy working adults who can learn at their own pace. As well, with lowered costs, open and distance learning institutions may be able to offer students **lower fees**. One respondent points out that: “In developing countries, the benefits of online learning depend, to a large extent, on government policies.”

One respondent concisely phrased the necessity of access: **“The world is online. Students must be online.”**

### Challenges

As is so often the case, the challenges are closely related to the benefits. For example, the important **benefit of increasing access by under-represented groups** is reflected in the top importance given to the **challenge of reaching marginalized groups**.

Challenges related to **pedagogy** and **quality** are very closely clustered in terms of importance – with use of technology, student engagement, assessment, redesign, and quality as the key issues in descending order of importance. The concerns with pedagogy and quality can be seen as linked to a need for faculty training and support to address these challenges.

**Student and employer resistance** are at the bottom of the list, perhaps indicating that, compared to other challenges, both groups accept and are ready for online, open, and flexible learning.

**CHALLENGES:** How do you rate the significance of each of the challenges faced by online, open, and flexible learning? Please rate out of 5 with 1 being the least and 5 as most important factor.

Responses in Order of Significance	Rating Average
Reaching marginalized groups	3.95
Effective use of technology for teaching and learning	3.80
Introducing more student engagement and participation	3.73
Online assessment	3.62
Curriculum redesign	3.61
Ensuring quality of content	3.56
Students who are not prepared for the technical and learning challenges of online learning	3.31
Lower credibility of credentials earned by online learning	3.10
Students unwilling to register in online courses	2.51

The **additional comments** provided by respondents can be grouped around two main themes – quality learning design and outcomes and institutional/regulatory factors.

Challenges concerning **quality learning design and outcomes** highlight:

- the need to make content and assessment flexible, creative, and appropriate, with both objective and descriptive questions;
- the integration of pedagogy, technology, and organizational factors;
- the necessity of a team approach for course design, involving instructional designers, subject matter experts, technology experts, and others;
- finding an effective balance between varied levels of individualization; and
- designing with principles of learning and engagement tailored for the adult learner.

Among the **institutional and regulatory challenges** are:

- the need for institutional structures for student support and tutoring;
- the lack of leadership, policy making, and teacher training for online and distance learning; and
- finding the appropriate level of regulation of online, open, and flexible learning by government agencies.

## Barriers

A key observation about the ranking of the **Barriers** is that they are, overall, **rated with lower importance than the Benefits and Challenges**. The average **Benefit** is given a 3.8 out of 5 rating for its importance, while for the **Challenges**, it is 3.49. For **Barriers**, the average rating is 3.03 – signifying, perhaps optimistically, that barriers are diminishing as online learning moves into the mainstream of education globally.

The **lack of funding** is clearly identified as the chief barrier to the adoption of online, open, and flexible learning. In **additional comments**, respondents see a broader lack of **political support** in terms of a need for supportive legislation, funding, and strategies. One reported result of this

is insufficient numbers of open and distance learning institutions in a country to fully promote the adoption of open and online learning.

The highly rated barrier of **lack of support for faculty adoption and training** was extended in some **individual comments** to include the lack of understanding on the part of senior management of the degree of staff development required. In addition, a lack of support at both governmental and institutional levels for collaboration in the development of new models for learning hampers the integration of online learning.

The next-rated barriers of the **lack of technology and other infrastructure** and the **lack of senior management commitment/institutional resistance** are related issues. Some implications of this are provided in the **individual comments**: for example, many of the structural institutional configurations result in all workload and costing models being based on a lecture-based means of education – ignoring the unique needs and contributions of online learning. To be effective, online learning requires a cultural transformation in an institution guided by a coherent implementation plan, bringing in cooperative and collaborative models of course design, development, and delivery.

As with the challenges, the **barriers related to students and employers are of lower significance**, situating the difficulties more at the institutional and governmental levels.

**BARRIERS: How do you rate the significance of each of the barriers to the adoption of online, open and flexible learning? Please rate out of 5 with 1 being the least and 5 as most important factor.**

Responses in Order of Significance	Rating Average
Lack of funding	3.54
Lack of support for faculty adoption and training	3.33
Lack of technical and other infrastructure at institutions	3.32
Lack of senior management commitment	3.22
Institutional resistance	3.15
Lack of recognition by employers	2.88
Lack of technology on part of students	2.72
Student resistance	2.13

An additional comment brings forward an issue pertaining to **information**: “the lack of information about credible providers of online learning.” Government policies and approaches to online learning are also noted as barriers.

Another respondent points out that: “These questions relate to traditional educational institutions which are becoming less and less relevant to employers.”

## New Technology and Content Approaches

One question explores the adoption of new technologies and software at organizations. Based on the number of additions to the list in individual comments, this question could have offered twice as many options.

The three top apps are clear – **open educational resources, blogs/discussion boards, and mobile learning**, all of which are adopted by about 70% of the responding organizations.

The next group, **personalized learning, massive open online courses, and simulations and virtual reality**, clusters between 40% and 50% adoption.

Which new technological and content approaches have been tried and/or integrated into one or more courses at your institutions in response to student demand?	
Responses in Order of Significance	Response Percent
Open Educational Resources (OER)	72.7%
Blogs/discussion boards	69.3%
Mobile learning	69.3%
Personalized learning	48.9%
Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) or segments of them	46.6%
Simulations/Virtual Reality	42.0%
Online Peer Assessment	34.6%
Gamification	26.1%

Among the additional technologies and software listed by respondents, the most common are:

- social media;
- wikis for collaborative activity;
- blended and hybrid learning, including the flipped classroom model;
- virtual classrooms and live lectures;
- e-books and open source library systems;
- online assessment and e-portfolios;
- class response systems to enhance student assessment;
- communication and interaction;
- online tutoring; and
- collaboration tools.

## Considering the Bali Message

As outlined above, the Bali Message was developed at a High-Level Policy Forum in November 2014 to offer specific recommendations to governments, educational institutions, and faculty. In this Survey, the respondents were asked to indicate which of these recommendations they consider to be most important in their country or region.

The Bali recommendations, indicative of policy challenges faced by governments and institutions, are divided into two questions – one relates to governments and the other to educational institutions and faculty. Respondents chose their top five strategies in each category.

### Government

The clear message for governments from the Survey is the need for **clear and comprehensive policies**, with more than 83% of respondents placing this priority in their top five of the listed options. The second priority links to **funding** with its focus on **capacity building**. The focus shifts to support for **research** in third place, with a return to **funding and policy imperatives** in the fourth rated strategy. The widespread adoption of open educational resources indicated above connects with the fifth highest ranked priority of **developing and adapting open learning resources**.

At the High-Level Policy Forum in Bali in November 2014, a number of strategies were outlined for GOVERNMENTS as important for turning a commitment to online, open, and flexible learning into reality. Please indicate up to FIVE of these that you would consider to be the most important in your country or region.

Priority Ratings by Respondents	Response Percent
Create clear, comprehensive policies that enable and encourage open and distance education and the needed incentives for modernizing education, in particular for open access to education and the use of open educational resources.	83.3%
Support capacity building for the more extensive use of open and distance learning and open educational resources.	79.8%
Invest in research in open and distance learning, flexible learning and innovative approaches to achieving learning outcomes	72.2%
Accept the responsibility to fund and provide enabling and effective policy and regulatory frameworks and conditions based on equity.	66.7%
Encourage the development and adaptation of open and distance learning resources across a variety of languages and cultural contexts.	51.1%
Create clear frameworks and outcome expectations for schools, colleges and universities for student success - it is success in learning that will enable development.	44.4%
Expand the number of schools, colleges and universities which have open admission and make use of open educational resources to enable those historically excluded from learning to have access to formal education.	44.4%

## Educational Institutions and Faculty

Some of the top choices presented in the above sections on Benefits, Challenges, and Barriers re-appear as the **first choice priorities for educational institutions and faculty** from the Bali Message – **professional development** for faculty and new approaches to **openness and assessment**. The third choice focuses on needs for **policy and practices** to support flexibility and innovation. These three top choices each received support of about 70% of the respondents.

The next set of priorities for educational institutions and faculty reflects the results of the question on priorities for Governments above – **professional development related to open educational resources and personalized learning** and **research on assessment and open educational resources**, each receiving support from more than 50% of the respondents.

Receiving ratings in the range of 40% are factors such as **flexible approaches to learning**, **personalized learning**, and **quality learning outcomes**, followed by **student success** at 30%.

**At the High-Level Policy Forum in Bali in November 2014, a number of strategies were outlined for EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND FACULTY as important for turning a commitment to online, open, and flexible learning into reality. Please indicate up to FIVE of these that you would consider to be the most important in your country or region.**

<b>Priority Ratings by Respondents</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>
Strengthen the professional development opportunities for all educators at all levels through the use of open and distance learning, new approaches to assessment and the use of open educational resources.	70.7%
Actively support policies and practices within schools, colleges and universities which enable openness, flexibility and innovation.	68.5%
Rethink approaches to assessment of learning so as to assess learning outcomes from formal and non-formal education, prior and work based learning and the self-taught student - making assessment resources and outcome measures as enabling access to and success in education.	66.3%
Engage in professional development intended to enable the development and effective use of open educational resources and support learners through personalized learning.	55.4%
Encourage research in open and distance education, new forms of assessment and the use of open educational resources	53.3%
Adopt approaches to the assessment for learning and assessment of learning which enable more flexible approaches to learning and enables both formal and non-formal learning to be integrated into programs and qualifications.	44.7%
Create systematic approaches to open, online and flexible learning which engages students and supports personalized learning.	43.5%
Undertake research and development in open and distance learning, flexible learning and innovative approaches to achieving quality learning outcomes.	42.4%
Create a broad range of actions and measures to enable student success	30.4%

## Beneficial Elements of Policy Frameworks

The first of three **open-ended questions** asks:

*What **elements or components of policy frameworks** at the national or institutional levels have, in your experience, been beneficial to the introduction and/or integration of online, open and flexible learning?*

Seventy-five (75) individuals responded to this question, providing **policy directions and challenges for governments and institutions** for online, open, and flexible learning. Their input is presented below, arranged by frequency of inclusion of the issue in respondents' comments. Direct quotes from some respondents are included to offer examples of good practice, or provide cautionary and contradictory opinions on some aspects of policy challenges.

### Access and Equity

The necessity of policy support for **access, equity, and student success** was frequently stated, with special mention of such groups as disabled students, those in geographically challenged areas such as small island states, marginalized groups, disadvantaged learners, all qualified learners, and open access for all learners regardless of previous academic achievement levels.

Suggested components of policy include:

- information and outreach to attract new learners;
- equal treatment and rights for open and distance learners;
- promotion of open access;
- responsiveness to the needs of the job market;
- adoption of an Equal Opportunity and Respect for Diversity Policy;
- innovations catering to all levels of learners;
- flexible learning approach;
- tuition assistance;
- working on a non-profit basis to allow low fees for students;
- application of the *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines* for the provision of multiple means of representation, engagement, and expressions for inclusive learning; and
- provision of support and study skills for previously unreached groups.

**Example of Good Practice in Access and Equity:** *“The Strategy for Effective Application of Information and Communications Technologies in Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria: 2014-2020”* has as its main objective the provision of **equitable and flexible access** to education and scientific information at any time and from anywhere – from all types of devices. With technology and design making lessons more interesting, the quality of curriculum and learning will improve. The strategy is the start of the changes to be made for improving the quality of education through online, open, and flexible learning.”

## Funding

**Policy that establishes financial support and sustainability** for open and distance learning is a requirement according to a large number of respondents. Some highlight the need to fund open and distance learning at the same level as on-campus learning as a useful yardstick. National and institutional master plans and commitments must accompany adequate funding, which may be from federal, state, and other sources.

## Regulation

Without any elaboration, a number of respondents simply listed “**clear regulation**” as a policy challenge for online, open, and flexible learning, while others more specifically defined regulation and audit systems that **acknowledge the differences** between face-to-face and distance learning. The frameworks should not only guide quality assessment, but also stimulate the development of online, open, and flexible learning.

One respondent outlines detailed expectations for regulations: “Regulations need to be detailed, specifying duties, standards, requirements for universities and they must work together with national public funding for quality online universities and learning initiatives.”

**Example of Good Practice in Regulation:** “The governments of Somalia, The Gambia, and Guinea Bissau accepted online learning at the university level as a sustainable form of higher education, which has enabled our institution to operate in those regions and beyond. Hence the **public policy instrument of ‘regulations’ has been the most beneficial factor of policy frameworks** at the national level in our experience in Africa.”

**Example of Good Practice in Regulation:** “The Open University of Brazil champions a federated model for offering online courses with local (municipal centre) support. **Legislation exists to regulate the offering of online and distance courses**, though some in private sector consider it too restrictive. The scenarios are substantially different for the public and private higher institutions and there is a great deal of autonomy in their policies.”

**Example of Good Practice in Regulation:** “The *Open Distance Learning Act*, which took effect in 2014 in the Philippines, encourages higher education institutions and post-secondary schools to introduce technology-enhanced learning with an emphasis on flexible and distributed learning. The nationwide public hearings concerning the *Act* were venues for announcing the policies, standards, and guidelines to assure the quality of open and distance learning.”

**Example of Good Practice in Regulation:** “Regulations that allowed and acknowledged online and distance learning played a key role in the development of online and flexible learning in Italy. Different laws in the last 20 years have addressed this topic, with the last one, in 2003, the *Moratti/Stanca Law*, allowing the setting up of online universities fully acknowledged by the Ministry of Higher Education. It also defined a set of standards for the newly credited universities.”

## Faculty

The necessity of ensuring **training opportunities for faculty**, as well as **support for innovation and effectiveness of teaching**, are elements to be included in policy statements. Policies and investments that encourage faculty to develop and teach, as well as increase their **sense of commitment and ownership**, would enhance quality online, open, and flexible learning. The **terms of engagement of teaching staff** are also worthy of consideration as some are unwilling to adapt to such new strategies as flexible teaching hours and readiness to teach in intensive modes.

**Cautionary Note Concerning Faculty:** “The most critical issues are related to the **educational culture of the institution**. When important cornerstones in the change process are addressed – equipping with modern technology, learning how to use technology, implementing up-to-date pedagogical use of technology, adopting the organization of the institution to work with ODL – one still has to realize that the **mindset of the staff may have an ‘old focus’**. Student focus, focus on learning outcomes, and focus on interaction have to replace earlier academic ways of looking at things.”

## Open Access Resources

Many respondents suggest policies that **support open access resources**, whether open educational resources, open courses, open research journals, or open texts. Recommended approaches include having the government require **open licensing of resources produced with public funding** and making **openness the default policy**, with restricted use of resources only in special cases. **Policies, as well as funding**, developed by national governments should include open educational resources, open books, and open and flexible distance learning initiatives.

**Cautionary Note Concerning Open Access Resources:** There are a few respondents who urged development of a **policy to protect the intellectual property rights of faculty**.

## Accreditation

The essence of the policy challenges outlined concerning accreditation is ensuring that there is **no distinction between face-to-face and online learning in the process of awarding accreditation**. **Greater flexibility in credentialing** is also seen as a policy issue – with life, professional, and informal learning to be measured for credit, with the emphasis on output knowledge rather than the method of study.

**Example of Good Practice in Accreditation:** “In Mongolia, work in progressing on a Cloud University project which will integrate academic credit systems with online and distance learning, create online collaboration among all Mongolian universities, and set up social networking of university, students, professors, graduates, parents, and employers.”

## Technology and Research

A few mentions of policy related to technology stress the importance of **fast and reliable infrastructure**, while **research is seen as critical to innovation**.

## Recommendations to Policy Makers on Access, Equity, and Quality Learning

The second open-ended question asks:

*What recommendations would you offer policy makers on further actions to consolidate the contributions of online, open, and flexible learning to addressing the access, equity, and quality learning imperatives in post-2015 higher education?*

In the 76 replies to this question, **access and equity policy recommendations** specify groups of **learners** to receive special attention and policies to be implemented. In their consideration of the issue of **quality learning outcomes**, respondents brought forward recommendations for policies related to student support and quality assurance instruments.

### Access and Equity

A broad recommendation to policy makers is to consider the **needs and voices of students** as an essential first step to looking for ways to **encourage and support equity in access and success** of students, especially those from marginalized groups, the disabled, indigenous populations, prisoners, cultural and religious minorities, the poor, and working adults. An additional policy challenge is creating an **optimal ratio of male and female students**. The special needs of students who have already graduated but need ICT skills are also brought forward.

Policy makers are urged to **support access and equity** through:

- funding for those in need;
- leveraging technology to foster creative learning experiences;
- creating public access facilities for those who lack technology or space for studying;
- reducing the cost per credit hour for distance education;
- not only regulating, but also promoting online learning;
- building student skills for online learning;
- developing policies that outline equity standards and approaches for online, open, and flexible learning;
- subsidizing student and faculty access to devices for those at risk of exclusion;
- integrating pedagogy and technology, so that access would be equitable, learning experiences would be satisfactory for all, and learning outcomes would be of high quality;
- promoting the importance of providing ongoing educational opportunities for workforce development so the public sees the benefits; and
- conducting research to quantify the issues and explore potential solutions for different equity groups.

## Quality Learning Outcomes

Respondents present policy makers with a number of recommendations related to quality, centred on the basic concept of **recognizing the value of online learning**. Policy makers are urged to create **supports for student success**, as well as **flexible quality assurance and measurement systems**.

Policy suggestions **addressing student support for quality outcomes** include:

- introduce students to online learning in secondary school so that they are better prepared for post-secondary education;
- provide quality materials developed by a diverse team of fully qualified topic matter experts and instructional design and other specialists;
- reflect the reality that graduates will be working in fields not related to their university studies by restructuring curricula to include the learning of skills and competencies that can be used in multiple employment situations;
- require all qualifications to have at least one module online, accompanied by faculty and student support;
- expand research to broadly and objectively identify impacts of various learning models on quality of life and career success; and
- invest in really effective short online learning modules on basic concepts and skills that can support those who are struggling, especially in academic literacy and mathematics, science, and engineering fields.

Policy ideas on **quality assurance** suggest:

- offering directions for quality assurance systems and monitoring practices for distance education, so that the indicators of effectiveness of educational institutions adjust to the realities of online, open, and flexible learning;
- equally validating the awards for open and flexible learning institutions to those of the conventional institutions;
- establishing clear rules for the development of online, open, and flexible learning, with financing to increase national connectivity and training for teachers at all levels;
- developing legislation that promotes open learning in terms of recognition and job opportunities;
- providing funding for quality distance and online learning initiatives, based on quality standards compliance;
- creating Key Performance Indicators, measured at regular intervals, so that students, parents, and companies can get an overview of institutional access, equity, and quality learning outcomes; and
- resisting the temptation to see a single path forward and so developing a singular, narrow definition of quality, which should instead be measured by the outcomes achieved and not by a single methodology.

**Cautionary Note concerning Quality Learning Outcomes:** While some respondents urged the necessity of policy in terms of academic quality assurance, another respondent suggested that

“due to differences of strategic goals, outcomes, resources, social condition, competencies required, and other factors, **no universal quality template for higher education is possible.**”

### **Key Points for Policy Makers**

A few respondents offered advice to policy makers to guide their deliberations.

**Act Now:** “Tell policy makers to open their minds and act now or others – powerful private companies – will.”

**Consult Widely:** “Wider consultation with all stakeholders, including teachers, students, and community members, is essential prior to the formulation of policy, as they will be the first to experience the impact of any changes and deserve a say in any policy development from both a moral and an equity perspective.”

**Know the Difference:** “Have a clear understanding of the differences across traditional on-campus and distance education institutions as the two have very different starting points toward online education and need different incentives and strategies.”

**Look Ahead:** “More research is needed on new business models emerging with the rapid pace of technological developments in online learning. No one has a clear idea of what is happening or where this is going. Institutions and actors are scared or excited, depending on their position. Students are confused or frustrated. The ideal situation seems far away in some dream initiative of a free, open, engaging, and job-oriented educational institution.”

## **Roles of Collaboration and Partnerships**

As befits a Survey preparing for a Global High-Level Policy Forum, the final **open-ended question** was directed at discovering how **collaboration and partnerships** have contributed to online, open, and flexible learning. Seventy-five (75) replies were received. The question asks:

*What roles have collaboration and partnerships played in online, open and flexible learning in higher education at the institutional, national, regional or international levels?*

One respondent sums up the reality very succinctly: “**You learn from and you help others.**”

The majority of the responses present aspects of **sharing and co-development of ideas and resources**. Activities related to **capacity building** are also core goals of partnerships and collaboration.

### **Idea Exchange**

The most oft-cited contribution of partnerships and collaboration, whether institutional, national, regional, or international, is access to **new ideas, different approaches, best**

**practices, innovation transfer, and joint research initiatives.** As stated by one respondent: “Sharing makes practitioners aware that the world of online learning is global and they must be more open to new ideas.”

**Example of Good Practice in Idea Exchange** National and international agreements and partnerships play a key role in online higher education. Information and communication technologies can overcome distance and time constraints. Collaboration with international institutions becomes possible, allowing the use of multiple forms of expertise, teaching materials, pedagogical approaches coming from different countries and cultures, **enriching the students’ learning experiences.**”

**Example of Good Practice in Idea Exchange: Collaboration with enterprises** improves curricula definition, which can be designed, based on a real needs analysis coming from the labour market. Collaborating with small, medium, and large enterprises helps in defining and proposing research projects for technologies applied to teaching and learning.

## **Resource Sharing**

Resource sharing includes:

- courses which may be made accessible to specific partners or more openly;
- open educational resources open for use and adaptation;
- faculty and student exchanges and in-service placements to enhance experience and perspective and share expertise;
- course recognition and credit transfer between institutions across the city or around the world; and
- joint advocacy and implementation strategies across a country or region.

**Example of Good Practice in Resource Sharing:** Collaboration and partnerships with traditional universities can **improve both the open/distance/online one and the traditional one.** Full professors coming from traditional universities will enrich the contents and the teaching capacity of the online university; in turn, the visiting professors will learn new pedagogical and organizational techniques, knowledge they will bring back to their original institutions.

## **Co-Development**

Effective co-development may take place within an institution or with any number and location of partners. Respondents cite the importance of **joint development of programmes, courses, and open educational resources.** Standards, quality assurance, and policies are developed through regional and other collaborations.

**Institutional Co-Development Example:** “A friendly environment at the institutional level has played a major role in success of Mehralborz Online Institute of Higher Education in Iran.”

**Sector Co-Development Example:** “Were it not for the ability of the **ENTIRE online community** to come together – non-profit, for profit vendors, government – online learning would not have become as quickly accepted (25 years vs. the usual 50 for acceptance of a truly disruptive innovation) in the US.”

**Sector Co-Development Example:** “The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015-2025) emphasizes globalised online learning and lifelong learning in strengthening its education system and branding. Malaysia offers **three collaborative models** for open and distance learning:

- The Asia e University was established with initial funding from the government and it is registered as a private, for-profit institution, as an example of public-private participation;
- Open University Malaysia is a consortium of 17 public universities, registered as a private institution for profit; and
- Wawasan Open University is an open and distance learning institution established as a non-profit organization under a foundation.

**Example of Good Practice in Co-Development:** “Our University (Arab Open University) has benefitted from its international partnership in terms of a dual award system, high level of recognition for the university’s open learning system, and overall high profile of the university in the region.”

## **Capacity Building**

Described as “essential in developing countries”, capacity building involves partners in providing **technical assistance, infrastructure upgrades, expertise, training, funding, and any other sources of assistance.**

**Cautionary Notes On Collaboration and Partnerships:** A few of the respondents point out that partnerships and collaboration have their challenges as well as benefits.

- One remarked that: “partnerships are established with ICT companies and overseas partners, but there is **little collaborative work nationally.**”
- Another stipulated that: “Partnerships and collaborations are complex issues and it is **hard to get institutions to work together** in consortia and the like. The EU has made important contributions as have regional and global organizations, such as ICDE (International Council for Open and Distance Education), EADTU (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities), EDEN (European Distance Education Network), etc.”
- A third cautioned that: “Sharing scarce resources (people, funding, expertise, students, and revenue) in the future is somewhat muddled by the **new levels and types of competition among institutions** that exist without traditional brick and mortar boundaries.”
- A fourth respondent commented that: “Policy makers, if they truly want to see the future we want, must jettison old relations, institutional and personal, and look

objectively to the possibilities that technology and new business models offer. **Not only will the future be very different, so too will the people that will share that journey.**"

## What We Heard

The 105 voices from 53 countries who responded to this Survey provided a number of clear messages for consideration and discussion at the Global High-Level Policy Forum in Paris – and for policy makers and educators beyond that event.

1. **Issues of access and equity are top of mind** for the respondents who consistently rated them as the key priorities and offered extensive lists of learners requiring special attention and support in order to participate and succeed in online, open, and flexible learning.
2. **Policies linked to access and equity** have to include not only the expansion of student numbers, but also outreach, course design, technology access, learning supports, and financial and other assistance to make online and open learning a possibility for under-served groups.
3. Respondents expressed a **commitment to the ‘new’** – whether pedagogies, courses, assessment, technologies, as well as groups of previously unreached learners, balanced by a recognition of the need for quality and the challenges for faculty, students and institutions.
4. **Policies related to change** must be situated in an environment that supports and rewards **faculty** in their development, design and delivery of courses – as well as their recognition of the unique benefits of online, open, and flexible learning. **Students** need policy support from governments and institutions to make the resources and supports they need available to them. **Institutions** require clear directions and regulations in line with their levels of autonomy, along with sustainable and adequate funding.
5. In responses concerning regulations, quality, funding, accreditation, management and institutional commitment, a **recurrent theme is the tension between traditional methods of delivery and the new approaches offered by online, open, and flexible learning**. Online, open, and flexible learning is often not treated equitably with more traditional methods, yet standards and performance measures have not been adapted to fit the new model. This has an impact on funding, faculty workload, student services, and a myriad of other factors.
6. For many respondents, it is imperative that **within policy environments, regulations, standards and expectations specific to online, open, and flexible learning** in regard to funding, human resources, registration and accreditation, credit hours and course timelines, course development and delivery measures, systems of accreditation, etc., are approached more systematically and appropriately.
7. Patterns in the responses to questions concerning benefits, challenges, and barriers, as well as the Bali Message, reveal that, while neither an unwillingness to participate in

online learning nor a lack of access to technology are impeding student success, the **ratings of the importance of student success were consistently low.**

8. Respondents rated frameworks, research and development, innovative approaches, and **actions and measures to enable student success at the bottom of the lists in terms of strategies** important for turning commitment to online learning into action. While access and equity are characterized as essential, student success/quality learning outcomes are not. The reasons for and implications of these choices are important points for further investigation and clarification.
9. The broad acceptance and integration of **open educational resources (OER)** is apparent throughout the Survey results. Continued and enhanced access to a growing inventory of OER is seen as a cornerstone for online, open, and flexible learning worldwide.
10. Policies are recommended to **support the continued development of OER**, favouring them for funding and as an approach to pedagogy, publishing, partnerships and collaboration, and resource development. These policies could build on the [2012 Paris OER Declaration](#), resulting from the World Open Educational Resources Congress, held at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris from June 20 to 22, 2012.

These are but a few of the insights that can be drawn from the Survey results. Readers will no doubt draw their own conclusions and discussion points, related to their experience, perspective, and interests.

Having an understanding of the thoughts and preferences of peers from around the world can advise and enliven the debates in Paris and offer insights to those not able to participate.

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

*It is estimated that 414.2 million students will be enrolled in higher education around the world by 2030 – an increase from 99.4 million in 2000<sup>1</sup>.*

*Who will these students be?*

*What strategies are necessary to support their success?*

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

*What are the best ways to expand capacity in quality higher education capacity?*

*What roles should online, open, and flexible learning and technology supported learning play in the massive expansion of higher education?*

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit. (2015) [Connecting universities: Future models of higher education. Analyzing innovative models for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka](#). The British Council and Economist Intelligence Unit.

## Purpose of this Paper

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

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

So that the participants in this Forum can share a baseline of information, this paper is the first step in a process to gather and share perspectives on the key policy issues, as well as possible responses based on international best practices. This discussion paper examines the issues of equity, access, and quality learning outcomes and presents specific issues, strategies, and opportunities for the future of higher education, in particular the possible contributions of online, open and flexible higher education.

Throughout the paper are Questions for Consideration regarding the issues and strategies for improving access, equity, and quality learning outcomes in higher education and the overall contributions of open and distance learning. These questions are posed to stimulate thought and consideration on some of the key issues to be discussed at the Paris Forum.

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

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

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

### ACCESS

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

1. Access to and success in higher education are critical components of a national social and economic development agenda. Economic growth, social cohesion, health and well-being and resilient communities are all aided by an increase in the educational levels of the population. The rationale for the expansion of higher education is rooted in a view of a global knowledge economy, which values knowledge, understanding and skills as the keys to the social and economic well-being of nations. In addition, higher education provides the teachers who are the core of the education offered to children and youth.
2. Need and desire for higher education far outstrips availability. The report, [\*Connecting universities: Future models of higher education. Analyzing innovative models for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka\*](#) provides an example of the scale of need can be found in South Asia. Expanding economies and youthful populations are driving continued growth in the appetite for higher education, exceeding the capacity of public institutions. Private universities are addressing some of the demand, but raising some concerns about quality assurance. It is estimated that the number of “a” level students per available university place in South Asia ranges from 4.89 in Sri Lanka to 1.13 in Pakistan. Other regions are experiencing similar pressures.
3. Access alone is insufficient to enable higher education institutions to achieve the social and economic impact of which they are capable. Completion of relevant, engaging and quality programmes is as important as access. In higher education, an open door which becomes a revolving door helps no one.
4. A key barrier to access and success is cost. As governments reduce their contributions to the financing of higher education per capita, then more of the cost burden falls on students and their families. Access to ICT infrastructures and high capacity networks is a part of the cost issue. Affordability of quality learning is a key social and political issue, which becomes more apparent as access is expanded.
5. With such initiatives as MOOCs and innovation and cost-effective methods of assessing and certifying the existing knowledge and skills of students opening up access, regulatory and economic environments, as well as learning methodologies and the use of technologies, need to be adapted as the array of higher education providers expands.

### Question for Consideration

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

## EQUITY

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

1. **The Implications of Culture:** Not all families, communities, institutions, and government policy frameworks know how to or do support certain groups of higher education learners. For example, those who are first in the families to attend higher education, those from low income families, indigenous peoples, or from under-represented groups.
2. **The Restrictions of Geography:** Many higher education institutions are located in large population centres. Students living away from these centres – rural and remote students – find accessing quality learning in disciplines appropriate to their interests and skills difficult. Online, open, and flexible learning can address some of these needs, but additional supports have to be in place.
3. **The Limitations of Gender:** While access to higher education by women has greatly increased over the last 30 years, there are still regions of the world where women have yet to achieve equity of access. More progress towards equity of access and support for success for women is needed.
4. **The Implications of Disability:** Disabilities, whether linked to physical or learning conditions, have a devastating effect of participation in higher education. Special supports, assistance, technologies, and adaptations of space are all necessary to allow equitable opportunities and success.
5. **Lack of Differentiated and Effective Support:** Not all students arrive at higher education institutions with the knowledge and skills to succeed. Academic, personal, financial, and learning skill support can all be effectively structured and made widely available to help all students. Many institutions have found that electronic delivery of learning support is particularly effective.
6. **Resilience and Persistence:** Drop-out rates for higher education remain high with many students who start a programme, not completing. Persistence and completion are especially related to the challenge of equity. In some studies, open and online students are more likely to leave before programme or course completion. Special supports and interaction can reduce this risk.

7. **Institutional Implications:** Equity of outcomes requires differential instruction, stronger relationships between students and the academic and support systems, as well as effective peer networks to support learners, especially those who are struggling. Building learner resilience is as important as teaching content.
8. **Broader Policy Implications:** Some students require broader social support (living on minimum wages, social housing, poverty reduction, social action programmes, community development). However, certain national policies can make a difference (e.g. policies concerning student costs).

**Question for Consideration**

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

## QUALITY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

1. **Improving access and equity in higher education does not, in itself, produce economic, social, or personal gains for the graduates.** Much depends on what kind of higher education students are able to access. As part of quality learning outcomes, relevance is a key issue in the design of programmes and courses. Relevance applies not just to the near term job market (which is itself fast changing), but also to the social and personal skills needed for success in society and to the need to be an adaptive, resilient and lifelong learner.
2. **Quality differs between institutions.** There is no such thing as a universal quality template for higher education. Quality is a function of strategic goals, competencies required, resources and social conditions. Quality needs to be determined in terms of intended learning outcomes, student engagement, availability of resources, teaching quality, supports for learning and the quality of student work. The impact of learning on the subsequent careers and community impact of students can also be a part of the quality assessment.
3. **Access to different kinds of learning processes** has the potential to improve quality. Technology can support enhanced quality in learning by accessing resources and experts from around the world, offering extended practice and feedback, offering various viewpoints and opportunities for exploration, and supporting more effective and engaging pedagogy. But where its use is limited or unreliable, technology can affect not only quality, but access and equity as well.

2. An **adaptive capacity is essential for higher education institutions** to be able to respond to multiple demands. The term ‘adaptive capacity’ refers to both a readiness for change and the ability to act quickly to adapt to changing conditions. Higher education institutions are being asked to do more to enable success for traditionally under-represented groups while at the same time expanding to meet demand for access and quality learning outcomes, often under conditions of resource scarcity. Higher education institutions must plan for further expansion of quality programmes, which are highly engaging, relevant and aligned with the development needs of a country or region without damaging the integrity of their current work.
3. **Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) can have a major impact on higher education.** [UNESCO’s review](#) of the impact of open education and OER in higher education summarizes recent developments and suggests that “It is clear that openness is here to stay and is changing the nature of higher education and therefore it is essential for institutions to engage with openness as a potential core organizational value if they wish to remain relevant and contribute to the positive advancement of the field of higher education.”
4. **Quality learning outcomes require the balancing of pedagogy with technology.** According to the study “[Online Learning in Postsecondary Education: A Review of the Empirical Literature \(2013-2014\)](#)”, students who study using open and distance education generally have comparable results to those taking part in face-to-face instruction. However, online, open, and flexible education requires a set of instructional design and technological development and deployment skills, which few faculty members have. Equally, many experts in technology are not experts either in the subject matter or in the nature of adult learning.
5. Quality programmes and course development, assessment, deployment, and delivery systems often **require a different model from that currently used in most post-secondary institutions.** Access, equity, and quality learning outcomes remain as issues, along with concerns for active student involvement in their learning and successful course completion. The focus needs to be on pedagogy and design as enabled by technology.
6. Employers are gaining a stronger voice in declaring what skills, knowledge, and standards they require, as some industries become more and more specialized. They may create their own learning paths for employees.

**Question for Consideration**

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

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

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

- **The development of mega universities.** There are institutions in Bangladesh, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, each with over a million enrolled students. Among the largest are the Open University of China and the Indira Gandhi National Open University, each with over 3 million enrolled students. At least sixty-degree granting entities enroll over 100,000 students each, providing broad access.
- **The development of open universities.** Admission at these open institutions is open, but completion is based on performance. Well-known examples include The Open University (UK), Athabasca University (Canada), Universitas Terbuka (Indonesia Open University), Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (Thailand), and the University of South Africa.
- **The growth of differentiation within higher education.** More and more institutions are seeking to differentiate themselves from their sister institutions within and between jurisdiction, focusing on specific areas of study. For example, the recently created Oceans University of Sri Lanka focuses on maritime and sea transport logistics, while the Institute for International Law in Abu Dhabi does what its name implies. There are a great many technical and polytechnic institutions, as well as schools of design, art and other focused institutions. Some institutions are exclusively for women, indigenous peoples and minorities. Differentiation in institutions may be used to both broaden access to more groups, or to favour select groups, who may be those traditionally under-represented in higher education. Differentiation can also be used as a way of keeping the higher quality institutions limited to the elite.
- **The involvement of private provision.** Private provision of higher education is an established approach in some countries, while in others it is relatively new and growing fast. This can add capacity and nimbleness to higher education provision, as well as complexity. Not all of these private developments are for profit; there are also significant non-profit and philanthropic institutions, such as Pontificia Universidade Católica de São Paulo in Brazil or Amity University in India. Some 80% of higher education students in the Philippines are enrolled in private institutions, which also play a major role in a number of other countries such as Belgium, Colombia, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea and Nigeria, to name a few.
- **The growth of dual mode institutions.** Distance education has been growing steadily for decades; with online learning expanding quickly in the last few years.

Many higher education institutions all over the world offer their students an option of online learning, whether for selected courses or for entire programmes. Online access may be used to increase enrollment, to offer more options to existing students, and/or to redesign large enrollment courses to make them more interactive and less lecture-based, as well as reach groups of students who cannot travel to campus.

- **The growth of blended learning.** Many institutions have successfully combined online learning with face-to-face classrooms in terms of both delivery and pedagogy. This blended delivery is often offered in the flipped classroom model in which the theory is delivered online through readings, videos, quizzes, and visuals. The face-to-face classroom may feature the professor working through problems and situations that apply the information. In addition, there may be small group work, in which the students apply the theory to real-world examples. This interaction is more informed by prior knowledge of theory, supporting student engagement, creation, and knowledge building.
- **The growth of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).** Universities all over the world have experimented with MOOCs and several have made a longer-term commitment to their creation and integration. MOOCs may be used as parts of courses in the originating institutions and adapted for use as educational resources in many others. In addition, students may enrol for their own interest, unrelated to any institutional programme or credit. Some institutions now offer credit for these free to study courses, with Malaysia being the first jurisdiction to mandate their use for all of its public universities.
- **The emergence of Open Educational Resources (OER).** UNESCO defines OER as “teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions”. Students are able to study through the use of OER, which are integrated into their courses. In some cases, OER can be part of Prior Learning Recognition and Assessment or other approaches in which students are assessed on what they have learned for credit. This credit may then be able to be transferred to institutions around the world.
- **The focus on student engagement and active learning.** Completion rates for programmes and courses increase according to how relevant students think the learning is to their personal and career needs and interests. Strategies for increasing practical applications and relevancy include project based work, co-op programmes, internship, lab and field work. Active engagement in learning, with discussions, debates, case studies offered online or in-class, also results in higher completion, according to the findings from the most recent annual report of the U. S. [\*National Survey of Student Engagement\*](#). The pedagogy of online learning often focuses on student involvement and interaction as a way of supporting completion and

optimum learning.

#### Questions for Consideration

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

## Specific Actions to Turn Commitment into Reality

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The deliberations at the Paris Forum are positioned at a decisive moment within the international context focused on development and education. To illustrate this, the highly significant international goals and reports have been outlined at the beginning of this document.

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

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

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

It is the documents, commitments, and goals for 2015-2030 that were outlined in the introduction to this Background Report “Online, Open, and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: Policy Challenges” that will anchor the discussions in Paris within the broader context of the contribution of education to sustainable development.

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