

High-Level Side event on Online University for LDCs (OUL)

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Concept Note

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I. Background and rationale

The Doha Programme of Action (DPOA) envisages establishing an Online University. The aim is to increase the provision of high-quality education, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields. It will also support the diverse range of digital skills that LDCs need to cope with the demands of the 4th Industrial Revolution. The Online University has the potential to allow people in the LDCs to access educational opportunities that may not be available to them otherwise.

The idea stems from the Sustainable Development Goal 4, which has an overarching vision to enable all learners acquire the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development. At least two targets¹ under this goal aspire to expand educational opportunities, including for higher education, in the LDCs. It also aims to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university.

Higher education is a critical component of human development and serves as a force multiplier for the sustainable development of a country. It provides not only high-level skills necessary for every labor market, but also training essential for personnel who are the drivers of structural transformation of an economy and for thought leaders in society. Empirical evidence suggests that countries that have experienced higher economic growth have simultaneously raised their rate of enrolment in higher education.

Despite extraordinary benefits associated with higher education, the tertiary-level enrolment rate is extremely low in LDCs. In 2020, gross school enrolment at the tertiary level was only 11 per cent against the global average of 40 per cent. It is therefore vitally important to undertake comprehensive measures to rapidly scale-up enrolment at the tertiary level.

It is difficult for most LDCs to establish an adequate number of universities that can provide students with quality education due to lack of finance, logistics,

¹ 4b. By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries

4 c. By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States

international recognition, quality faculty members, and human resources. Recognizing these difficulties, the establishment and running of an online university might be cost effective and students can save a lot of money and time related to commuting and lodging. Many students are interested to take advantage of online colleges and universities as a cost-effective, affordable and viable alternative to a traditional college or university.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a major fault line in the education system, especially in the LDCs. The UNESCO Global Survey on higher education, which came out in July, 2021, revealed that the pandemic impacted 220 million tertiary level students around the world². In LDCs, almost all universities had to remain completely closed. While academic institutions in advanced countries could swiftly transition to online education, LDCs could not do so due to lack of necessary logistics, technological tools, and skills.

The worldwide digital transformation of higher education, accelerated by the pandemic experience, can provide an expansion of educational opportunities. The combination of increased computing power, diminishing prices of hardware and software, improvement of wireless and satellite technologies, and reduced telecommunication costs has all but removed the space and time barriers to information access and exchange. These provide an important opportunity to promote online education, which can be the most effective and efficient way to offer affordable quality higher education in line with SDG 4.

In a world where technological advancement is happening at lightning speed, there is a risk that countries will be left behind if they do not invest in the digital skills of those who become creators of tomorrow. Online courses allow students to attend classes anywhere they can access reliable Wi-Fi. They give students more opportunities for flexibility in their tightly packed schedules. Time and resources can be better allocated to learning and accessing campus resources, like meeting with instructors in virtual office hours or attending live-streamed campus events. Studies show that the majority of higher education students rated the opportunities provided by online learning as excellent.

The most prominent opportunity to meet the growing needs of higher education at a large scale in an efficient, cost-effective and resilient manner, is to rapidly build online education infrastructure in LDCs. Strong national efforts,

² [New UNESCO global survey reveals impact of COVID-19 on higher education](#)

supported by the international community, is urgently needed to develop online universities in LDCs.

There are some intergovernmental initiatives already in place, which can provide a basis for further investment, integration, and mobilization of resources. The African Virtual University and Commonwealth of Learning are two good examples of leveraging online platforms for creating opportunities for networked education.

II. Objectives

The objectives of the side event, jointly co-organized by the UN-OHRLLS, Education Above All, the Commonwealth and UNESCO, are, among others, to:

(i) Discuss the policy and financial support required to materialize the DPOA's vision to establish an "Online University". A key deliverable designed to foster the promotion and development of distance education and open learning primarily dedicated to teaching graduate and post-graduate studies on STEM for citizens of LDCs and graduated countries,

(ii) To find effective means to launch world class online programmes affiliated with existing educational institutions at home and abroad.

(iii) Explore ways and means to help LDCs create a virtual network of educational institutions within and beyond the LDCs, with a particular focus to create platforms for enhanced and meaningful collaboration with reputed Universities across the world.

(iv) Highlight the challenges of the LDCs in course design and curriculum development for technology enabled education and learning, ensuring high academic excellence and global recognition of its certification.

(v) Sharing ideas and good practices on developing online educational infrastructure to reduce accessibility gaps in high-level STEM education.

III. Guiding Questions:

1. What role can the “Online University” play to provide advisory support to LDCs for policy/strategy development? This should be aimed at promoting online programmes at graduation and post-graduation level; building partnerships and a virtual network with UNESCO and other relevant UN Agencies, as well as renowned universities, to prepare a repository of online/distance learning solutions?
2. How can the proposed Online University support the LDCs bridge the gap of knowledge, skill and quality education by focusing on skills development for employability and increased capacity in STEM subjects?
3. How can the Online University help tailoring learning approaches and recognition strategies of the universities/higher education in LDCs to receive wider acceptance among comparable educational institutions in developed countries?
4. How can the Online University help facilitate access to quality education for women and girls, especially those who dropped out of school due to poverty, early marriage or pregnancy as well as people with disabilities?
5. How can the Online University help capacity building of the faculties of different universities and other higher educational institutions in LDCs, including by exchange of scholars and students?
6. What is the appropriate organizational structure and funding for the Online University?

IV. Participants

Member States, International Organizations, CSOs, Private Sector, Youth and Media representatives will participate in the side event.

V. Outcome

Summary of the discussions the circulated which will contribute to the study of the Secretary-General on the possible options for Online University.