International Conference on
Perspectives and Innovations in Open and Distance Learning

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<u>Introduction to the Theme</u>

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen

After those lovely words of welcome by Professor Saroj Sharma, it is my privilege to introduce the theme of the event – *Perspectives and Innovations in Open and Distance Learning*.

Although it is possible to speak about each of the five words of the theme – I would focus on the two major aspects and the seven sub-themes that underpin the conference:

- The first and the foremost aspect of the conference is the concept of 'ODL' which per se refers to the provision of educational opportunities through methods that aim to overcome barriers to access – be it financial, age, location, disability, status, occupation or even incarceration.
- The second and, interestingly, the two-in-one or the twin aspects of the conference is 'Perspectives and Innovations'. These per se refer to new ways of thinking based on one's belief systems and experiences on one hand, and the processes that have been placed by organisations to transform ideas into new and improved products and services, on the other hand, to advance their value proposition in the marketplace.

In other words, there is a new transformation at play in the ODL systems that were seen to be transformative years ago when these were introduced worldwide, to begin with, in the UK, and thereafter in the rest of the world. Therefore, we are discussing in this conference a phenomenon called *transformation upon transformation*, perpetuated by certain development of the recent years. These are seen in the following prism:

- Education is no longer a privilege but a necessary tool for one's own life and livelihood.
- Education is not for the privileged alone but for 'all.' The concept of 'all' is clearly for everyone – from 'cradle' to the 'grave' emphasising upon the need for lifelong learning.
- Education for all or for that matter everyone and anyone, anytime, anywhere, anyway, and anyhow is the commitment of global governments.
- Educational provisions are steered by the technological disruptions and advances of recent decades in fulfilling the above commitments.
- The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), one of the most reformative and forward-looking innovations in the modern era is the foundation for the transformation and the benefits to be accrued for the entire century ahead. There will be ripple effects elsewhere.

At this very moment, let me add that these policy innovations have been brought to fore by the key architects of Indian education, at least three of them are on the stage today. Their commitment to bringing education and skills at the doorsteps of every citizen, lifelong, shall be seen as transformation upon transformation.

In this backdrop, we have recognised the following seven sub-themes as important for further deliberations and knowledge sharing. The perspectives and innovative ideas, up for discussion today and the next two days, shall make this conference, what Professor Saroj Sharma calls, an Academic Extravaganza.

Let me touch upon those sub-themes very briefly, one by one.

1. *New Perspectives and Innovations in policy frameworks and practices in ODL*

There is no distinction between online, ODL and face-to-face learning today. There is also the opportunity for choice-based learning among learners. They are allowed to exit and enter programmes at their pace and comforts and they are allowed to not only window shop but accumulate credits of their choice and design their own degrees. They can redeem their credits as and when they wish to, provided they have enough credit points to demand certification, diploma, degree, or degree by research and so on. The policies today allow them to go all the way up to attaining doctoral degrees if one wishes.

In other words, the transformation upon transformation is aimed at seeing education as fundamental to unleashing and achieving full human potential, fundamental to achieving an equitable and just society and for the promotion of national development. The policy framework recognises that with every human being achieving one's own potential, the nation will ascend

into the global stage in terms of economic growth, social justice, equality, scientific advancement, cultural preservation and national integration.

This conference is likely to discover best practice exemplars that translate the policy provisions into transformational practice through Open and Distance Learning.

2. *New Perspectives and Innovations in Technology-enabled Learning in ODL*

Technology has been an enabler for nation's growth and development; surely, it has shown its potential for enabling greater access to and success in learning. Technology also plays an important role in transforming educational processes and outcomes.

The introduction of blockchain technology, extended reality for immersive learning experiences, data analytics for assessing learner behaviour and the use of artificial intelligence for personalisation in learner support, assessment and growth path, AI-based translation for speech to speech and speech to text and vice versa for mother tongue learning and real-time engagement are just a few of the many things in the offing. India's leadership at the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence this year and the India AI mission which has a significant workforce development component are only the natural advances in the use of technology in education.

The National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) has been created for this purpose of not just exploring but ensuring that technology-enabled learning is a mainstay in education.

This conference is likely to discover best practice exemplars that demonstrate innovations in technology and technology-enabled learning as well as technology-driven transformation in Open and Distance Learning.

3. *New Perspectives and Innovations in Pedagogical Approaches in ODL*

The latest development in education, especially in ODL is the furtherance of blended learning, and blended learning approaches in educational practice. What used to be known as instructional design has today become what one calls the blended learning design. ODL systems designed texts for the invisible learners where innovative pedagogical approaches were imminent.

Now with technology-enabled learning practices, there are many possibilities – for collaborative learning, co-creating learning experiences, peer assessments, instant feedback mechanisms, adaptive learning, problem-based learning, experiential learning, activity-based learning, action-oriented learning, and the use of technology for reducing the classroom time whereby anytime anywhere learning coupled with flipped classroom techniques. The models at play include, rotation model, self-blend model, hyflex model, enriched virtual model and cognitive apprenticeship. The National Education Policy 2020, if one were to say, in two words – its Blended Learning!

This conference is likely to discover best practice exemplars that demonstrate innovations in pedagogical approaches to various blends and blending in Open and Distance Learning.

4. *New Perspectives and Innovations in Administrative Strategies in ODL*

The transformation witnessed in education, especially in the form of choice-based education, flexibility in learning, entry and exit options for learners, earning credits from other institutions which can be redeemed at anchor institutions, introduction of cluster based approaches among higher education institutions, multi-disciplinary programmes, introduction of professors of practice, collaboration with industry for industry-led curriculum, work place-based learning opportunities, social work and other forms of learning and a variety of other measures bring about certain administrative challenges, especially for weak public institutions that do not have enough managerial bandwidth.

Added to these are challenges such as investment in technology and cloud computing systems as well as the creation of learning management systems. There is also the need to build the capacity of faculty members, non-teaching staff and the administrative staff to become in sync with the latest innovations is also the need of the hour.

Innovations such as on-demand examinations, anytime certifications, going beyond the status-quo approach of linking up study centres with the industry, telecentres, community multi-media centres and local government agencies do bring about changes in administrative strategies.

This conference, we hope, shall highlight some of those innovations in administration and the use of artificial intelligence-based tools and techniques for things such as prediction of future skills, optimisation of educators' time, engagement of third parties for student support services and the deployment of bots and helpdesks as well as personal digital tutors, etc are factors staring at us. Certain papers to be presented by research scholars touch upon some of these issues.

5. *New Perspectives and Innovations in Inclusive Access, Equity and Quality in ODL*

Education for all demands newer strategies and approaches to inclusivity, especially for including the 'typically' excluded. These would include persons with disability, elderly population, children with specific learning disability, developing strategies for identifying, accommodating and developing inclusion strategies are the need of the hour. It is interesting that these factors will determine the success of ODL programmes in years to come where it has always been – the ODL systems, as disruptors, dealt with the agenda of inclusion.

While it may be true that the ODL systems supported remote learners, thus, catered to people at the last mile, there are newer challenges posing the ODL systems in terms of serving the disabled. COL-CEMCA's recent study among 5008 visually impaired persons revealed that the best option for education and skill development among them was the ODL system. However, the research also revealed that the systems were very fragile.

The policy frameworks include the socio-economically disadvantaged groups and ensuring equity for all genders; socio-cultural identities, especially scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward communities, minorities. geographical identities, especially learners from remote villages, small towns and aspirational districts; socio-economic conditions such as migrant communities, low-income households, children in vulnerable situations, victims of child trafficking, orphans, child beggars in urban areas and the urban poor.

This conference, while delving into the sub-theme of inclusion and equity, would also demonstrate exemplars of access with quality education and skill development through ODL systems.

6. *New Perspectives and Innovations in the provision of Vocational Education and Skills through ODL*

The interface between vocational education and academic pursuits of learners is a huge opportunity facing societies. As much education produces conscious global citizens who possess value systems, it becomes imperative for governments to ensure that the same education systems produce the workforce of tomorrow. The introduction of vocational education in the early years of education can be seen as a big innovation and pathbreaking exercise; however, introducing vocational skills through ODL systems are likely to be transformative. COL-CEMCA's study of curriculum of electrician trade skill offered in Indian Industrial Training Institutes revealed the opportunity for introducing blended learning practices – for enhancing efficiency and quality in skill development so also doubling the enrolment rate of students in these institutions. The use of technology is key to achieving results through these blended learning approaches. In ODL, we have also seen alignment with industries for providing workplace-based learning as well as certification opportunities. Vocational education systems have understood the importance of embedding soft skills, 21st century skills as well as digital skills in the curriculum. A combination of MOOCs, online education and experiential learning are innovations of recent years. However, the big break-through is likely to arrive in the form of the introduction of AI in the ODL systems for the provision of vocational education and trade skills to learners. COL's study during the COVID Pandemic helped to realise various reskilling opportunities through ODL means.

This conference shall explore a variety of methods that the ODL systems can embrace for delivering high quality skilling programmes to citizens and reskilling and upskilling programmes for lifelong learners as well as eRPL programmes for those in the informal workforce to enter the formal workforce with certification as passport for employment and entrepreneurship.

7. *New Perspectives and Innovation through International Collaborations in ODL*

While many nations are advocating for internationalisation, the ODL systems are the natural fit for international collaboration and certification programmes. Examples such as the international drivers' license in computing have shown that skills, no matter where these are honed and

acquired, shall be useful in any geography. Skills offer international mobility opportunities. In the field of ODL, it is important to explore recognition and acceptance of qualifications and certifications, especially in trade skill domains. ODL systems can offer the much-required bridging programmes and preparatory education for attaining equivalency in certifications. While the IT industry has been very successful in introducing international certification programmes in several fields, it becomes critical for the ODL systems to also develop similar programmes that can be recognised by a consortium of institutions that participate in these programmes. COL's CEMBA/CEMPA programme is a good example of how certifications earned by learners are recognised by multiple institutions. There are opportunities for ODL institutions to participate in online systems such as SWAYAM, Skill India Digital Portal and Blended Learning Portal of Agricultural institutions.

This conference shall dedicate a separate session in the form of an 'Open House' that will discuss international collaboration and aspects of seamless transition from school system to tertiary system, especially for acquiring skill certifications. That apart, a range of scholars are going to present papers on the topic.

Ladies and gentlemen, the International Conference on Perspectives and Innovations in Open and Distance Learning shall indeed be an opportunity to discuss and determine the future strategies that will further strengthen the ODL systems, which contribute immensely to education and skill development.

I wish each one a great learning experience over the next three days!

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