EDITORIAL

The *Sustainable Development Report 2019*: What can We do to Address the Challenges?

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The United Nations *Sustainable Development Report 2019* makes sobering reading. Not only are there "shockingly low proficiency rates in reading and mathematics [which] signal a global learning crisis", but "750 million adults still cannot read and write a simple statement; two thirds of those adults are women" (United Nations, 2019, Goal 4, pp. 30-31). United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres comments that "It is abundantly clear that a much deeper, faster and more ambitious response is needed to unleash the social and economic transformation needed to achieve our 2030 goals."[i] But why has there been so little progress? What can be done to address some of the concerns identified? This issue of *JL4D* looks at some of the challenges and some of positive developments towards solutions.

Some of the challenges facing educational institutions are discussed in our Special Feature by Professor Som Naidu, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Flexible Learning and Director, Center for Flexible Learning at the University of the South Pacific. We are delighted that Som is providing the third in our series of reflections by leading figures in the area of open, distance and online learning. Previous contributions from Terry Anderson[ii] and Gilly Salmon[iii] have challenged us to think about the uses and abuses of social media and the need to vision the future to provide the most appropriate learning experience for our students. Som provides an equally challenging article in his consideration of current drivers for change in Higher Education (HE) and how, and indeed if, these are being considered and addressed.

Som is, of course, extremely well known for his championship of "Open, flexible and technology-enhanced learning and teaching" (OFTeL) over many decades and in many roles in Australia and the South Pacific. These include the critical academic leadership roles he has held at the University of Southern Queensland, The University of Melbourne, and Charles Sturt University, and currently back at the University of the South Pacific where he began his career in OFTeL.

A PhD graduate of the famed Educational Technology Program of Concordia University in Montreal, Som is widely known for his role as Executive Editor (since 1997), of *Distance Education, the Journal of the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia*. In this role, Som has consistently written thought-provoking Editorials that challenge us to reconsider and review our assumptions about the meaning of "distance education" (Naidu, 2014), how it can best support learners, and its core concepts, arguing that: "The threshold principles at the heart of all models of distance education remain openness and flexibility which we see as value principles, much like we see diversity, equity or equality in education and society more broadly" (Naidu, 2017). Indeed, his appreciation and interrogation of new developments and directions in areas previously termed "open learning" and

"e-learning" (see e.g., Naidu, 2003) has led to the much more nuanced and inclusive terminology of OFTeL that recognizes the rapidly changing field in which we work. He has also encouraged debate and interrogation of new developments, such as MOOCs (see for example, Baggaley, 2013) through the *Journal*'s section on "Reviews and Reflections."

OFTeL must be underpinned by appropriate research and Som is a leading figure in championing such research, both through his own work (e.g., Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016), and perhaps even more importantly through his mentoring of authors and contributors to *Distance Education*, and his extensive leadership, involvement and support of capacity building projects in course and curriculum design and development, online learning and e-learning in many developing countries throughout the world but especially in South Asia and the Pacific. His 2003 guidebook on the principles, procedures and practices of e-learning provided key advice and guidance to readers and enabled them to "tell a story" about their experiences in relation to the issue or subject under discussion (Naidu, 2003/2006).

He has since been involved in numerous research and development projects across the world, for example one of his projects with Karunanayaka and Abeywardena focusses on the adoption and integration of *Open Educational Resources and Open Educational Practices*[iv] for student teachers. Som is a leading figure in learning for development, and his engagement with current projects, discussions and research into OFTeL make him an ideal contributor to our series of reflections from leaders in the field.

In our article Som addresses some of the issues identified in the *Sustainable Development Report 2019,* in relation to the need for high level commitment to meeting major current changes that threaten to make the achievement of SDGs even more problematical. He challenges educational institutions, particularly higher education institutions (HEIs), to consider how and whether they can lead learning for the future in the context of current disruptive forces; these require educational institutions to rethink, reconfigure and recalibrate their pedagogies and processes in order to meet the needs of changing student OFTeL. Drivers for disruption include access to technology, demand for flexibility, need for connectivity, disaggregation of teaching roles and the growth of alternative digital credentialing. Universities of the future will need to address these changes: are they ready? Som argues that many educational institutions are not responding in systemic ways and are operating on outdated principles. He identifies pathways to address these challenges; but these will include rethinking pedagogies for learning and teaching, and providing more support and professional development for staff if there is any hope for the SDGs to be realized.

Professional development for teachers will be especially important in sub-Saharan Africa. *The Sustainable Development Report 2019* notes that this area accounts for most of the achievement gap in the provision of quality education, although parts of central and southern Asia also lag behind. "Southern Asia alone is home to nearly half (49 per cent) of the global population who are illiterate". However, in sub-Saharan Africa, "88 percent of children (202 million) of primary and lower secondary school age were not proficient in reading and 84 percent (193 million) were not proficient in mathematics". One of the most important factors for the future will be "getting enough trained teachers into classrooms. Here again, sub-Saharan Africa lags behind. In 2017, that region had the lowest percentages of trained teachers in pre-primary (48 per cent), primary (64 per cent) and secondary (50 per cent) education". (United Nations, 2019, p. 31).

Our first research article by Stutchbury, Gallestegi & Woodward from The Open University UK (OU UK) addresses some of these challenges in their discussion of a new programme which aims to provide school-based professional development for teachers in Zambia. ZEST (Zambian Education School-based Training) provides resources and activities for teachers but does not prescribe particular practices; it rather aims to empower teachers to choose their own practices, best suited to their own contexts. Working with key stakeholders, the programme developers use open learning principles to develop open learning practices through the use of open educational resources (OER), and by so doing support a shift towards more learner-centred pedagogies. Through workshops, monitoring visits and a small-scale evaluation, the authors are able to demonstrate some important outcomes from the programme which indicate its potential when scaled up. For example, teachers seemed to gain confidence, a sense of community with their colleagues and improve their skills and practice; there are also signs that learners' literacy improved, slow/shy learners became more engaged and absenteeism was reduced. Hierarchical educational structures and the need to demonstrate impact are still issues to be addressed, but the programme has great potential to make some difference and, if scaled up, assist in improving the alarming literacy rates indicated in the *SDG Report 2019*.

The use of OER and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is growing across sub-Saharan Africa. However, in 2015, a UNESCO report noted that this growth had tended toward "a techno-centric approach to ICT in education. Clearly, a strategy that prioritises sound pedagogy, training teachers to use ICT effectively to support instruction and building overall capacity is more appropriate" (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2015, p. 20). Our first research article was concerned with professional development of teachers; our second research article, also from sub-Saharan Africa, identifies some further concerns.

Tanzania is making considerable investment in e-learning systems in secondary schools; but are these being used? This provides the subject for our article by Mtebe and Kondoro from the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. A project to increase teachers' subject knowledge of science subjects and mathematics through the use of digital resources was successful, so the materials were adapted and made available to students. Using data mining tools on 68,827 records, Mtebe and Kondoro demonstrate that usage of these resources has been moderate and has been declining every month. Mobile phones are banned in Tanzanian schools and so the potential benefits of these resources are limited, despite the fact that 75 percent of Tanzanian adults reported owning a mobile phone in 2017 (Pew Research Centre, 2017). Another issue is the high costs of, and limited rural access to, connectivity, illustrating Naidu's point that connectivity is far from universal. The authors conclude that more action needs to be taken to ensure that the benefits from the resources can be realized.

Our first three articles support the use of OER and digital resources as ways of meeting some of the challenges mentioned in the 2019 *SDG Report*. This approach is endorsed by COL President and CEO Prof Asha Kanwar in her introduction to UNESCO and COL's *Guidelines on the Development of Open Educational Resources Policies* where she notes that "OER have tremendous potential for promoting equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all. OER emerged as a technology-driven solution to address issues of cost and quality. But OER are also based on values: equity, inclusion, collaboration and respect for diversity" (Kanwar, 2019, p. 4). Our remaining articles provide further examples of the potential of OER to meet SDGs and address some of the drivers for change discussed by Naidu.

One of the questions Naidu asks is: how are HEIs responding to the use of more open, flexible and technology-enhance learning (OFTeL)? How far are they prepared for institutional change? Our third research article by Morgan, from the Justice Institute of British Columbia (JIBC), Canada, examines the use of Open Educational resources (OER) and Open Educational Practices (OEP) at JIBC through an important and rare longitudinal study of evolutionary organizational change in terms of institutional response to "openness". The need for institutional change is one of Naidu's calls for action in our first article and Morgan provides a very useful example in her study of the approach to "openness" at JIBC from 2010-1014 and in a follow-up study in 2018. In the earlier study she found that new models for teaching and learning could be in conflict with current practices of, for example, protecting content to preserve funding, and so there could be complications with business models and workload. By 2018, there is greater institutional acceptance of "openness" – for example OER are included in JIBC's Academic Plan 2016-2020, but there are no institutional policies to support their development. While there has been a significant shift from closed courses, materials and models to a greater recognition of the value OER and open textbooks, there are concerns about models of sustainability and tensions arising from some externally funded projects.

Some of the changes Morgan observes at JIBC between 2014-18 are the development of free introductory courses to some programmes, and the conversion of a paid course to free access with the only (and much cheaper) payment being for taking an exam. Our final two articles provide additional discussion of these subjects and also illustrate some of Naidu's drivers for change in relation to the demand for alternative digital credentials.

The OU UK's OpenLearn[v] platform was launched in 2006 to provide extracts from OU courses as OER available to anyone. Previous institutional research had demonstrated that a large number of current OU students were using the resources and, in her article, Law, from the OU UK, focuses on these current OU students, the ways in which they use OpenLearn, their motivations and the impact on their learning. She traces institutional research from 2016 onwards which resulted in a major relaunch of the website in 2017, incidentally providing a good example of how institutional research can drive practical change. Surveys in 2016 and 2017 found that the resources on OpenLearn improved student confidence and aided future course choice, as well as having an impact on student success and retention. In response to feedback, some of the most recent developments have been the piloting and launch of an induction course and the provision of digital badges to provide formal OU branded recognition of study for employers or *curriculum vitae.*

Digital badges and blockchain as new means of recognizing achievement are the subject of our final article by Downes. Blockchain is a way of encoding and managing digital records, and has the potential to link together and verify educational achievements. It thus can provide proof of digital educational qualifications, such as badges awarded for the completion of particular tasks – in this case a connectivist Massive Open Online Course (cMOOC). Downes' Report from the Field explores the development of an application that uses open badges and blockchain within a cMOOC. While some aspects of course design could not be implemented, the study provides an example of the workflow from content to storage and "proof of concept" in that the development of a distributed badging infrastructure was feasible.

Our book review contributes to the discussions raised in the rest of this issue. The fourth edition of the *Handbook of Distance Education*, ed., Moore & Diehl, may focus on the North American, and

particularly United States, Higher Education experience but Neal notes that the section on theoretical frameworks and instructional design are universally helpful, and discussions of teaching and learning are useful starting points for others.

The United Nations *SDG Report 2019* notes that "high level political commitment to the SDGs is falling short of historic promises…. The gap between rhetoric and action must be closed" (United Nations, 2019, p. 2).

Have our articles been able to provide any smaller but positive responses to the call for action? I think they have. We have valuable articles providing evidence of new developments in education at the primary (Stutchbury et al.), secondary (Mtebe & Kondoro), and tertiary level (Morgan; Law; Downes) all of which will support changes necessary to meet the SDGs, through professional development (Stutchbury et al.), institutional change (Morgan; Law), increasing use of OER and digital resources (Stuchbury et al.; Mtebe & Kondoro), and willingness to use new approaches, for example, in providing digital badges to recognize achievement (Law; Downes). All of these developments are exactly those that Naidu identified in his opening article as needing urgent attention in a changing environment.

So, there are some positive signs for the future. And this makes it a good note on which to end my Editorship of *JL4D*.

It has been an enormous privilege and a great pleasure to edit *JL4D* for the last four years. *JL4D* is a very important journal, particularly through its combination of commitment to learning for development, inclusive content and open access policies, which reflect some of the key principles of the Commonwealth of Learning. I am delighted to confirm that Professor Santosh Panda, from the Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE), Indira Gandhi National Open University of India (IGNOU) has agreed to take on the role of Chief Editor in the future. Prof Panda has already contributed several articles to *JL4D*, for example identifying leaders in distance education in Asia[vi] , and is ideally placed to take the *Journal* into the future.

I should like to thank two of my colleagues who have provided exceptional support throughout the four years of my Editorship: Dr Sanjaya Mishra, Associate Editor, without whose substantial contributions and assistance the *Journal* would not have appeared at all; and Copy Editor Alan Doree who smooths all our writings into much more elegant prose.

And finally, and most important of all: especial thanks to you all as our contributors and readers. Please keep your articles coming!

Anne Gaskell

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[i] https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/progress-report/

[ii] https://jl4d.org/index.php/ejl4d/article/view/327

[iii] https://jl4d.org/index.php/ejl4d/article/view/352

[iv] https://www.researchgate.net/project/Open-Educational-Resources-OER-Open-Educational-Practices-OEP

[v] https://www.open.edu/openlearn/

[vi] https://jl4d.org/index.php/ejl4d/article/view/263/253