Promoting the global flow of quality content and pedagogy

February marked an important milestone for the future of higher education in Asia and the Pacific. China and Indonesia, two massive higher education systems within the E9 countries, signed a cooperation agreement between the Indonesia Cyber Education Institute (ICE Institute) based at Universitas Terbuka and XuetangX based at Tsinghua University, two major national MOOC platforms in Indonesia and China.

As a result of the agreement, XuetangX will donate 60 MOOCs developed by 18 Chinese higher education institutions to Indonesian learners via the ICE Institute. This is a significant achievement in promoting the international flow of quality content and pedagogy, which can help to improve the access, quality and equity of higher education provision in the Asia-Pacific region.

While we welcome the potential of ICT in the delivery of higher education programmes, too often we ignore the importance and the availability of quality content and the supporting pedagogy to deliver it. Digital divides are worrying, with gaps opening up between the ICT haves and have-nots, yet content gaps also widen learning inequalities.

Ahead of the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022) in May 2022, a new social contract to improve both content and delivery of higher education is key.

Improving content and pedagogy through online learning

It is time for us to pay equal attention to content development and improving the teaching of students and adults to drive investments in ICT infrastructure at the system and institutional levels. This is critical if we are to ensure that all our efforts enhance ICT-content-pedagogy integration.

Each of these elements contributes to the overarching objectives enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) Target 4.3 on equitable access to quality tertiary education, and Target 4B which calls for more scholarships to be provided to students from developing countries to promote mobility.

Several well-established and well-functioning MOOC portals have been in operation in countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as K-MOOCs, J-MOOCs, Thai-MOOCs, Malaysian MOOCs, XuetangX, ICE Institute, etc. Some were initiated and financed by governments, some were created by a consortium of universities, and some were developed by the private sector. Each is providing platforms for quality content and pedagogy to be jointly developed, quality-assured and shared not only domestically, but also internationally.
UNESCO Bangkok has been following regional progress since 2015 with a series of regional meetings on MOOCs, including on seizing digital opportunities to achieve the SDGs back in June 2018 in Shenzhen, China.

Considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the need to promote the flexibility, relevance and diversity of higher education provision, MOOCs will continue to be an important source of course-level learning that can lead to credits, micro-credentials or even a full qualification if their quality is assured in line with qualification frameworks and part of credit banks (ie individual learning accounts). However, the challenges linked to delivering world-class open educational resources remain a barrier.

**Open educational resources**

In 2017, in collaboration with the government of Slovenia, UNESCO organised the Second World Open Educational Resources (OER) Congress to reflect the pivotal role OERs can play in achieving the SDGs, including SDG 4 on quality education.

Five concrete actions were identified to mainstream OERs and achieve SDG 4 which include:

- Building the capacity of users to find, re-use, create and share OERs;
- Addressing issues around language and cultural diversity;
- Ensuring inclusive and equitable access to quality OERs;
- Developing sustainability models; and
- Developing supportive policy environments.

In view of this updated framework, content development, preferably in the form of OERs, should be regarded as policy enablers for greater access and improved quality and equity in higher education. There should be concentrated and continuous government investment in content upgrading in all disciplines and fields of study with national initiatives to engage top universities.

Key MOOC platforms like XuetangX and ICE Institute can serve as national knowledge and expertise repositories to disseminate and share existing quality teaching and learning materials, including in partnership with the private sector. MOOCs are not all free, many are fee-paying and ‘open’ to those who can afford it.

However, there is great potential for MOOCs to be based on OERs that can lead to the award of credits, micro-credentials and even full qualifications, as mentioned. This would facilitate in-country and international flow of quality content and pedagogy to benefit both domestic and international learners. Due to the online nature of MOOCs, quality teaching can travel outside of national boundaries if agreements, such as the one between ICE Institute and XuetangX, can be reached.
Localisation of content

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to think of alternatives to cross-border student mobility. Sharing MOOCs among countries and institutions is another effective way to make content move, rather than individual learners. However, as stated, there are clear gaps in the development and supply of quality content and pedagogy among countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Capacity building and capacity strengthening are essential to fill the gaps and ensure that the international flow of quality content and pedagogy does not undermine the content development capacity of local and indigenous people, as well as the cultural and linguistic diversity of higher education provision. The international flow of quality content and pedagogy should be supported by processes of national adaptation and localisation.

Every country can be both a sending and receiving country in terms of the flow of quality content and pedagogy, which contributes to our common goal of ensuring access to quality higher education for all.

WHEC2022: Trends to watch

To share experiences and co-construct the future of higher education, UNESCO is calling for contributions to WHEC2022. The event has only been convened twice before, in 1997 and 2009.

While major themes will be addressed, several stand out as particularly urgent for Asia and the Pacific:

• Youth participation to shape a new HED [UNESCO Higher Education] 2030 Roadmap: In a major outreach, UNESCO is giving the floor to young people. The WHEC2022 Youth Consultations are open to all youth from all backgrounds and regions and provide an opportunity to speak up, regardless of having studied at a higher education institution or not.

As the world's most populous region, meaningful youth engagement in Asia-Pacific is critical. Major issues to tackle include well-being, governance, digital futures, sustainability, bridging the gap with the professional world, indigenous youth, migration, inclusion and COVID-19. Youth participation to shape this agenda will determine if the HED 2030 Roadmap has value for the next generation.

• Engagement (and exhaustion) of higher education teaching personnel: UNESCO is working to explore the main predictors of work engagement (motivation and energy) and risk of burnout (chronic and extreme fatigue) among faculty, as well as its consequences for proactive behaviour and work performance.

A new study will evaluate how these relationships have changed based on COVID-19 intensity and cultural differences in each country. In line with the 1997 recommendation concerning the status of higher education teaching personnel, WHEC2022 calls on faculty
to raise their voice and concerns. A new survey is open for all regions.

- The Global Convention on higher education: The need for a new social contract for higher education has never been greater. In 2019, member states worldwide adopted the Global Convention as the first legally binding UN treaty on higher education. To date, there are 10 state parties, but 20 are needed to bring the Global Convention into force. UNESCO is working with member states worldwide to accelerate their efforts to ratify the convention in time to announce their progress by WHEC2022. To date, no member states in Asia-Pacific have ratified, although several are close.

The Global Convention and complementary Tokyo Convention at regional level are key to promote mobility and employability so that all learners are equipped with the relevant skills and qualifications needed to meet individual, labour market and societal demands.

We would like to offer congratulations again to our Indonesian and Chinese colleagues on their collective achievements. In preparation for WHEC2022, UNESCO is looking forward to a significant change of pace to achieve SDG 4 and tangible outcomes to benefit all learners in Asia-Pacific and worldwide.

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