



INTERNATIONAL
COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND
DISTANCE EDUCATION

ICDE PRESIDENTS' FORUM 2020: Summary Report

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Preface

A universal call for help was raised by educational providers and governments early in 2020 as they scrambled to ensure learning continues during the fall out caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the spotlight turning to the opportunities afforded through Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (OFDL) modalities.

The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) who works through its members and learning communities to realise the potential of OFDL responded immediately by mobilising its global network of experts in OFDL through its #LearningTogether campaign in early March 2020. In November 2020 ICDE took the opportunity to reflect back and learn from the experiences from the pandemic to prepare tools and systems to reduce future disruptions to delivering education based on lessons learnt from the onset of the pandemic. On the 25 November Presidents, Vice-Chancellors, Principals, and Rectors of higher education providers among current ICDE Institutional Members and the Presidents and CEOs of partner organisations gathered for the ICDE Presidents' Forum 2020 to focus discussions on "*Recalibrating educational leadership for resilient education*".

It is within this context that the 2020 ICDE President's Forum was framed and this report provides a summary of outputs from ICDE members discussions that took place virtually across 6 regions within the space of 24 hours. The registered delegates were distributed across the 6 regional sessions with 16 registered for the Africa regional session, 10 for Latin and South America, 13 for Asia, 27 for Europe and 10 for Oceania.

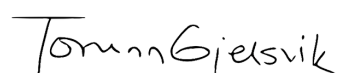
ICDE was well supported in focusing the discussions on the 25 November through the contributions from partner organisations who hosted pre-forum satellite engagement events. ICDE would like to acknowledge the support provided by Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), European Distance Education Network (EDEN), Globethics.net and the Swedish Association of Distance Education (SADE).

ICDE would also like to acknowledge the contributions to the ICDE Presidents' Forum 2020 from the following three keynote speakers; Professor Asha Singh Kanwar, President and Chief Executive Officer of Commonwealth of Learning (CoL),

Professor Mandla Stanley Makhanya, former Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Dr Ethel Agnes P. Valenzuela, Director of South East Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO). Finally, we will thank our ICDE Board Members; Prof. Dato' Ansary Ahmed, Dr. Som Naidu, Dr. Mark Nichols, Prof. Carlos Alberto P de Oliveira and Prof. Dr. Ebba Ossiannilsson, who chaired and facilitated the discussions on the day and contributed to this report.



Dr. Neil Fassina
ICDE President



Torunn Gjelsvik
ICDE Secretary General

Executive Summary

The summary that follows synthesizes the regional ICDE President's Forum 2020 breakout discussions. Readers will note that each regional summary is broken into the two-task format of the discussion groups. While every effort has been taken to capture the spirit of each conversation, we acknowledge that some discrepancy may exist.

While regional differences and nuances were present, many themes were found in both task 1 and task 2. For instance, common challenges included consistency of infrastructure for learning (i.e., both digital and pen-to-paper formats), limitations to access for both apparent and emergent disadvantaged groups (e.g., digital divide and hidden disabilities), limitations to current regulatory and quality assurance systems regionally and internationally, the absence of robust leadership globally (at the instructional level, managerial level, and senior level) of institutions shifting to distance learning for the first time, and financial constraints. Many of these risks contributed to a further risk associated with the long-term reputation of OFDL, recognizing that many of the risks contributed to lesser quality OFDL environments that were created in a rush as a pragmatic and necessary response to COVID-19 restrictions.

Turning to solutions, common themes prevailed over regional differences. A key solution focus of many regions was the need for partnerships and relationships that make connections beyond those traditionally thought to be relevant to OFDL providers. This includes connecting higher education to a broader range of governmental, non-governmental, and private organizations. The need for partnerships recognized opportunities for collaborative efforts to move beyond response toward recovery and resiliency in a post-pandemic world. To complement the need for partnership, there was a renewed call for the development of leadership at all levels to help steer higher education organizations toward resilience in quality learning experience concurrent with alternative or revised economic models for higher education. A final theme around resilience was the need for amplified communications, regionally and globally, to ensure the long-term sustainability, reliability, and quality reputation of OFDL.

Links to the various presentations, vlogs and resources curated for the Summit can be found [here](#).



Regional Summaries

In support of the overall summary, a synopsis of the discussion in each region is offered below.

Africa

Task One: A risk assessment of future challenges for leadership in delivering resilient education

Members in the Africa session identified the widening gap between urban and rural learners as one of the key challenges facing higher education. More specifically, students in remote areas have less access to connectivity. Associated with the digital divide between urban and rural are limited access to devices and the prohibitive cost of data. Of note, the Africa group identified the need for research on the baseline of technology availability and use in education.

A second key area of consideration identified by the group was the challenges associated with migrating to remote learning. In some cases, the risk related to the robustness of the Learning Management System (LMS); in others it related to the readiness and capabilities of both lecturers and students to migrate current curriculum to remote learning.

A third area of consideration for the Africa group was the regulatory framework and policy regarding remote learning. In some cases, the risk was related to the role of government policy and regulatory environment. In others it related to the difference in funding between the private and public institutions. Specifically, private institutions do not receive funding from government.

When participants reflected on the impact of these risks on them as leaders, they focused on the challenges of balancing the needs of faculty with the needs of learners. For faculty, there are fears related to job security and simultaneously needs for development to improve their skills. For students, there are concerns regarding cost vis-à-vis not being on campus. Additional comments were made in relation to the resources and efforts that would be needed to reimagine the new future, how to integrate technology, and how to recalibrate the learning environment and assessment to new models. Participants also highlighted the challenges that will be faced in identifying funding opportunities and the increased speed of decision making.

When addressing the impact on resilient education, the Africa group focused on the need for infrastructure to support future models of learning in a cost effective manner to avoid increasing the urban/rural divide. There was also discussion about how to ensure that learning remains inclusive by cultivating new technologies and removing barriers for online learning.

Task Two: Needs and solutions

Turning to solutions, the Africa forum focused on the need for collaboration, partnership and advocacy. From a collaboration and partnership perspective, the need for wide ranging partners from government, through regulatory bodies, private enterprises, higher education commissions, faith-based organizations, and other institutions was considered essential to the future of resilient education.

With respect to advocacy, the need was identified for evidence-based advocacy related to funding, policy and regulations with governments. The need for higher visibility in all regions and visibility of ICDE within the United Nations (UN) regarding the impact of OFDL was also identified.

Asia

Task One: A risk assessment of future challenges for leadership in delivering resilient education

The challenges identified by the group in Asia were quite diverse. One key challenge was the role of infrastructure (or lack thereof) in relation to connectivity, devices, operating systems, and back-end infrastructure. These limitations were identified for both the institutions as well as the learners with recognition that there were multiple solutions, each of which would necessitate a different investment and approach by the institution and learners.

Among the additional challenges identified were the financial constraints of institutions to invest in quality online teaching and learning. Without resources, institutions may not be able to cope with the expenses related to creating

quality and may satisfice with lesser standards. Related to the point of financial constraints is the perception that online does not create as high a quality learning environment as face-to-face.

A third area of concern raised by the Asia group related to equity, specifically limitations placed on women or persons of different abilities. Institutions will need to pay more attention to students outside the “average or norm.”

A culture that did not adequately empower sharing was also seen as a potential barrier, in particular the sharing of resources related to best practice. This limitation may hinder progress toward improving the perspective of teaching faculty and challenging the general sentiment of not wanting to or not being prepared to teach online.

One imminent challenge identified by the Asia group is that policy initiatives tend to be quite conservative based on selective consultations rather than inclusive ones. As a result, policies tend to consider the interests of few institutions. Instead, there needs to be a mechanism to change the traditional mindset of institutions.

There was a general consensus across Asia participants that resilient education is that which can still be sustained or can still continue despite the disruptions like the one that we are experiencing now. Based on the experience of the group members and their observations in terms of what happened to other institutions, online education can be described as resilient given that ‘cyber institutions’ were ‘business as usual’ despite the COVID-19 pandemic. While traditional universities were all grappling with how to go about their business when lockdowns were enforced, cyber universities just continued. It was noted that disruptions can be in different forms e.g. natural calamities, peace and order situations in the country. Another attribute of online learning that came up in the discussion is its inclusivity to non-traditional learners including lifelong learners, which university leaders should also be concerned about.

A concluding concern was that we will not be able to implement the basic concept of distance education or education for all. Any future unforeseen consequences will therefore continue to adversely impact society in uneven ways.

Task Two: Needs and solutions

There was an identified need for institutions to work together. In particular, Open/Cyber institutions should work together with traditional institutions to enable the traditional institutions to address the problems they encountered when they shifted to online learning. The areas of collaboration can be in the form of: infrastructure provision, as in the case of Virtual University Pakistan making available their LMS for the use of the traditional universities; resource sharing; training of teachers; an agreed-upon-framework for quality in online learning (and even other modes of instruction which has online component e.g. blended; flipped; hybrid); and credit transfer.

A second area identified by Asia participants for consideration was for institutions to work directly with industry. During this time of pandemic and even after, institutions and industries should be working together for recovery. New jobs may have been generated, particularly now that alternative work arrangements are increasingly considered long term (WFH – Working From Home – is very much aligned with the ‘gig economy’). Universities should be able to offer the upskilling programs to help the industries recover and these programs are best offered online. There can be short certification programs and even hybrid courses and programs to be offered with the industry. It was also noted that industry could support student scholarships.

A third area for consideration is that institutions should work with their governments to address infrastructure concerns. While governments are working to solve the infrastructure problems, institutions could design learning that reflects the local infrastructure and student access. At the same time, partnerships could formulate and implement national policies in support of the initiatives by institutions and in support of online/distance learning. The group also identified the potential for free or concessionary online access to students and loans to enable the purchase of devices.

Following on the challenges identified in part 1, the Asia group noted the need for additional support from government funding and policy directions from regulatory bodies to enable a new normal.

Additional observations related to cybersecurity (the need to educate teachers and the students) and scalability of learning environments (this needs to be confirmed if the plan is to accommodate more students).

With respect to how ICDE can help, the Asia group discussed the continuation of sharing resources: Open Education Resources (OERs), policy recommendations which can be adopted at the national level and training opportunities (not only for teachers but also for university leaders in, for example, strategic planning). A global framework for quality online learning to ensure quality was also proposed. The ICDE can provide an agreed-upon framework, vetted by its members, which can be used by institutions. A toolkit for quality assurance might be released that recognizes the expenses associated with accreditation. The ICDE might also do more to promote collaboration among members and provide leadership to promote and facilitate cooperation and collaboration at the international level, including across regional organizations and associations. Finally, the ICDE might help develop policies for members and partners assisting with lobbying efforts with government and policy directives related to OFDL.

Europe

Task One: A risk assessment of future challenges for leadership in delivering resilient education

European participants particularly highlighted leadership itself as presenting risk to resilient education. Strong, inclusive leadership based on broad engagement, diversity and engagement is required across disciplines and generational divides. Clear communication is required. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the quality of leadership across higher education. Those universities that best managed the transition into distance teaching benefited from clear messages for students and staff, the trust shown in students and staff, and sensitivity to the pace of innovation adoption.

Networking and sharing were also key elements of success, as in times of crisis people tend to rely much more on one another. Networks provide opportunities for sharing good practices and resource sharing.

The capability of academic staff to engage with online education is frequently of concern; European participants described going alone as particularly risky and described the benefits of networks over conversation partners. That online tools might serve different purposes across different parts of the curricula was also mentioned.

Engaging with professional communities ensures the concepts of 'online teaching' and 'online learning' are expanded; there is risk that these terms might be hijacked by privileged groups. This risk also extends to the identity of distance education itself. It was felt that overall trends toward opening education through flexibility and digitisation is supporting diversity, connection, and resilience while also improving diversity and socialisation however distance education is easily done, badly. What constitutes effective distance education is not well understood or adequately defined. This is a problem as new educational and business models are being developed; there is concern that digital tools are driving pedagogy. The pressing shift to 'go online' results in poor distance education practice, presenting considerable risk to students and reducing the resilience of the overall education sector.

Infrastructure for and investment in online education was also highlighted.

Policies without either commitment or implementation plans were also highlighted as a risk. European participants were specific in picking up on the Open Educational Resources Recommendation and Sustainable Development Goals agreed to by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), pointing out that the 'why' of these goals was not broadly understood. As a result, implementation is piecemeal and fragmented, further risking their endorsement and achievement. Concern about policy was linked back to the earlier risks associated with leadership.

European participants sensed that many universities are losing touch with industry, presenting a further and imminent challenge to their resilience. Educational stakeholders and partners of multiple stripes have a part to play in assisting the direction online education might take. The risk of a narrowness of perspective from decision makers was at the base of much concern.

Task Two: Needs and solutions

A call for adaptive, nimble leadership was prominent among European participants. In the words of one group, “This COVID-19 disruption has ‘exposed’ the shortcomings of poor leaders. Good leaders are always good leaders as they know how to pivot. Poor leaders are struggling with the virtual and blended approach to communication, with leading their teams, with adapting their leadership styles.” Such leadership will ideally flourish within a clear and consistent policy framework, which takes a long-term view and a quality focus.

The potential for the ICDE to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experience was highlighted. It was pointed out that local and global action need to be intertwined, so that local evidence informs and critiques global resolutions and so the ‘slow burn’ of influencing government does not result in no progress. OER were singled out as a case in point (here paraphrased from notes):

People need to see the business case however OER is not best presented from a business-minded approach. Why should a harassed government, without many resources, focus on OER? The open text-book story is often underplayed and could be revisited. The OER agenda addresses at least five of UNESCO’s Sustainable Development Goals. The Open Education for a Better World (OE4BW) initiative is one example of what could be better promoted.

The need for funding for quality online education, building on private sector infrastructure, was also viewed as key. Funding might be specifically set aside for responses to disruption such as pandemic solutions, perhaps through European Commission Education and Culture and Employment programs and NGOs such as UNESCO. Effective means of rapid response to practical elements such as ‘educating the educators’ are difficult to organise in the heat of emergency response, so forward-plans will ideally be available. Such plans might promote distance and blended forms of learning.

The need for university leaders to become more business minded was also suggested, accentuated by the likely changes to employment needs in the post-COVID-19 environment. The new skills ecosystem may demand a different educational model than that currently in place, to the extent that important elements of ‘education’ itself (such as accreditation, credentialization and teaching) may need to be re-thought.

Better connections between companies and employment agencies, as well as training providers, will assist in determining the best shape that flexible education might take on. Private-public partnerships whereby expertise can be coordinated might be funded.

While the ICDE is suggested as a focal point for solutions, in-country education consortia were also proposed. These might involve universities and key stakeholders from both public and private sectors. While educational quality is viewed as the domain of the university, peer networks and international organisations such as the ICDE, European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), EDEN and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) were also identified as having parts to play. ICDE might, in particular develop know-how and networking opportunities, promote the sharing of best practices, provide policy recommendations and facilitate links to updated information on specific aspects of open and distance learning that might be relevant to emergency response. Supporting campus-based institutions in their response to emergency conditions (promoting good practice, proposed standards, teaching competences) should be a particular focus.

Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a reference-point, European participants proposed a series of research questions to identify the critical problems which might be then assigned to different social actors. Three themes were identified as a starting point:

1. Student behaviour. After the pandemic is over or controlled, what will students expect and prefer: fully online, blended, or campus-based education? Will students come to classrooms, or not? What new educational designs will be needed?
2. Remote teaching. If conditions of work are closed, how can online learning support education for those roles that are most needed? Even though much work is now knowledge based, the demand for location-specific, in-person work will not go away. How can this be facilitated when campuses are closed?
3. Digital poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed, even in supposedly wealthy societies, the issue of 'digital deprivation'. Whereas the physical infrastructure of the classroom is the same for everyone, accessing online

education is different; some may have a quiet study, others a smartphone at a busy kitchen table. Are these issues adequately understood? How might this be addressed?

Governments have a clear role in dealing with social policy issues, such as digital poverty (responses here will likely need to be country-specific). Governments also serve to regulate education accreditation and the recognition of courses. As funders, governments can do more to promote good practice in online education – without compromising important innovation. A clear and consistent framework will do much to reassure students, employers and the public of the quality of online education.

North America

Task One: A risk assessment of future challenges for leadership in delivering resilient education

The range of potential challenges covered by participants in North America ranged from psychological fitness through economic limitations and public impression.

An early emphasis focused on mental health concerns, specifically the potential for psychological harm both for learners and for institutional stewards. There was recognition that the challenges of mental health fatigue and trauma will be experienced different for different groups. While there was connection to the economic impacts, a focal point remained on the need for forums in the community to address the issues.

The primary element of concern related to the reputational risk for OFDL in a post-vaccine world. Namely, as in-person institutions move toward in-person learning, there is risk of a negative narrative related to the limitations of digitally mediated classrooms. In particular the definition of online learning has been blurred and remote learning may be confused with online learning.

Recognising the transformative power of OFDL, the North America group identified the need to promote the value proposition of online learning. In short, the need to ‘own’ the narrative of online quality being a precursor to policy and funding changes. The group identified the need to move away from the modality being the primary driver of the learning description.

With a focus on how learning is created, the group addressed the challenges faced by academics in moving from in-person to online learning. There is a need to match the art and science of purpose-built online learning. The risk identified by the group is that many academics may perceive digitally enabled learning as a temporary solution as compared to a permanent solution. The group noted that this could be used as a 'teaching moment' so as to build upon what has been learned during the pandemic.

The North America group also identified elements of challenge related to digital infrastructure. The digital divide has been made quite apparent through the pandemic. The digital divide related to the usable device, connectivity, the learning environment, and necessary band width. A minor silver lining identified, however, was that institutions are able to update their business continuity plans.

Recognition of the digital divide highlighted the elements related to equity and the need for accommodations. The environment needs to adapt to the average and those in need of additional supports simultaneously.

Task Two: Needs and solutions

The key solution identified by the North America group in response to the challenges identified in part 1 is a focus on public relations, communications, and positive narrative. There was an identified need for government relations media kits, key messages, and support tools to help enable members to impact and transform the narrative in their local region.

The North America group identified mechanisms that would help support communications efforts. These included social media campaign materials, celebrity endorsement, public service announcements and op-eds. In all cases, however, there was a determined need to back each message with data rather than anecdote. In the end, the group identified the need to move away from a debate about the modality of learning and focus on learning itself.

To support the efforts of ICDE, participants also focused on the need for broader and more robust partnerships. These include groups like the World Economic Forum and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that, while they share a common vision for the long range, propose different pathways to get there.

Oceania

Task One: A risk assessment of future challenges for leadership in delivering resilient education

Participants across Oceania recognised multiple environmental challenges that might be considered imminent, many of which have been recently experienced by countries across the region: flooding; tropical cyclones causing population movement; earthquakes; pandemics; internal population movements were all top of mind. Most of these situations are characterised by social and infrastructure disruption and an immediate focus on recovery. The responses to each of these might be quite different depending on the effects on infrastructure and immediate priorities. Teaching staff can lack the capability to respond to an environment changed under emergency conditions.

Infrastructure factors including basic connectivity to the internet (whether through availability, cost or bandwidth), cost of devices and maintaining ICT infrastructure were identified across participants. The cost and distribution of print materials, where still used (often instead of online materials) can also pose a challenge. Such issues are not necessarily limited to low to medium income countries. Literacy and numeracy, and awareness of opportunities in education, present further gaps.

Across Oceania participants suggested that equity factors related to persons with disabilities' accessibility, women's education, refugees, remote learners, teacher training and student success differed very much by country, though it was felt that disability universally required more attention. Hidden disabilities need to be taken note of in the development of open and distance learning, and the range of disabilities and how they are addressed also presents a challenge. Counselling services are also in need of development across some jurisdictions, which can be the result of a paucity of trained and qualified counsellors.

Policy and national/regional frameworks for quality and distance education also present some risk to resilience in education. Cross-institutional collaboration is

questionable, as institutions tend to be inward-looking. Not all countries have a body responsible for quality frameworks; OER is a particular gap. Traditional mindsets related to education – particularly poor impressions of online and open education – also present barriers. Participants pointed out that political cycles can often disrupt long-term policy intentions, as can tensions across private- and public-good views of education. In addition to these challenges, participants agreed that terminology across OFDL and online learning is slack. More might also be done at the level of policy to promote more flexible expressions of education that might enhance its resilience and accessibility, including through quality frameworks that might serve as the basis for international agreement.

Finally, responses to crises and disruption can also produce financial challenges, which may result in education budgets being revised; publicly funded institutions might be especially vulnerable. These financial burdens might be the result of public spending taking a more recovery focus or, as is now being experienced, a loss of income from international students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Financial models were assessed as not being sufficiently resilient.

Task Two: Needs and solutions

Oceania participants were united in their view that a centralised, go-to agency is best positioned to provide options for recovery and clear communication. Services might even extend to consultancy and links to agencies and ministries that might assist in recovery. Support for business continuity planning, perhaps by template, was also suggested. It was felt that the ICDE might serve as a central hub, perhaps with funding support via government (the latter certainly required for relief funding and support for financial planning).

In support of infrastructural considerations, discounted or zero-rated (subsidised) internet access was proposed for those involved in study. Government support for local wireless networks and nationwide, collaborative provision of learning centres were also suggested to improve the sharing of existing infrastructure and ensure appropriate data security measures are in place. The role of the private sector in providing robust infrastructure was also highlighted. It was felt that the ICDE had a

role to play in promoting resilient connectivity across the world, with the suggestion that “ICDE needs to be politically orientated with advocacy.” This might extend to supporting qualifications continuity across borders and promoting industry concessions in times of crisis. Local professional bodies might also have a part to play.

Good practice, drawing from such international bodies as the Commonwealth of Learning, also suggests ways of partnering across governments and aid agencies. International bodies such as International Organization of Standardization (ISO) can provide opportunities to set and promote common standards for quality and credentialling. Oceania participants summarised the need for networks of support that are active and present in times of challenge. Peer group networks and service agencies are important resources and ICDE can play a part in leveraging local representative bodies and networks.

South & Latin America

Task One: A risk assessment of future challenges for leadership in delivering resilient education

Across Latin America many regional differences were highlighted. In some countries, education continued as normal under Covid restrictions; in others a mix of face-to-face and remote education (of varying quality) was the norm. In Brazil the challenge was for higher education, whereas in Argentina the challenge was more for K12. Students should be able to access to education at all levels in all countries. Flexibility in national guidelines meant rapid response to pandemic conditions, but also led to multiple approaches. The autonomy of decision-making given to education providers must be balanced with criteria that guarantee academic quality. Distance education was not considered in some countries as the basis for a response to pandemic conditions.

Regulatory frameworks related to online and distance education were highlighted as a specific concern. The level of acknowledgement and legitimacy of open and distance education, particularly with reference to academic quality, is not as high as it should be country-by-country. Many countries in Latin America already have specific regulatory frameworks for distance education, but, in most cases, these have been developed under the assumption that this type of education is of low quality.

This perception has frequently restrained the growth and investment in distance approaches. A lack of regulation toward the design and development of quality open and distance education programs presents significant risk to resilient education. Regulations can provide assurances to governments, educators and students to quality compliance.

During the COVID-19 pandemic students were exposed to many different forms of education. These multiple forms present a risk in the form of education quality. Latin America participants suggested that women might be particularly disadvantaged under these conditions and emphasised that social differences are likely to become stronger after the pandemic.

Device availability and connectivity was highlighted as of concern. Traditional media such as radio and television provide universal access however broadband and electricity provision can be highly politicised, to the extent that internet access is perceived as a privilege rather than a right.

Task Two: Needs and solutions

Strong relationships across stakeholders was highlighted as a need by Latin America participants. Government, the private sector and educational leaders were identified as parties for improved collaboration, though the challenges to collaboration across these groups are clear. It was felt that leadership by local, regional and national government could be important across the region to create policies that enable solutions to overcome the challenges however solutions should also involve stakeholders such as civic groups involved to ensure relevance. Flexibility should be a part of any new regulations and guidelines.

Solutions across Latin America might benefit from country-by-country considerations and involve local leadership. It was suggested that the ICDE might serve by promoting quality education and OER in the area by helping institutions create regional bonds based on similar challenges. Guidance into open and distance education would also be of some value.

New regulations and guidelines might be built in consensus with government entities, accreditation agencies, experts in distance education, universities that have experience in open and distance teaching, and agencies such as the ICDE, UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) La Red Iberoamericana para el Aseguramiento de la Calidad en la Educación Superior (RIACES), Associação Universidade em Rede (UNIREDE) (Brazil), the Brazilian Association for Distance Education (ABED) (Brazil) and Fundación Reinserción de Marginados REMAR (Ecuador). The recognition of such agencies is an important part of their legitimacy.

Hosting regional events was suggested as a means of collecting the needs, suggestions and concerns of different regions and promoting relationships. These collated perspectives might be published in the form of recommendations to the higher education authorities of different countries.

Conclusion

Building on lessons learned from the 2019 Presidents' Forum in combination with those learned from early COVID-19 responses, the 2020 ICDE Presidents' Forum created a six-time zone, fully virtual, synchronous, and asynchronous forum for global leaders to share, contribute, and discuss those challenges relevant to ensuring we can create quality and resilient education systems long-term globally. Together, Presidents embraced the opportunity to connect and communicate through ways typically reserved for our many learners around the world. Through this forum, we were able to capture regional differences and nuances in the many challenges and opportunities being faced by OFDL institutions globally. Simultaneously, we were able to identify commonalities that bring us all together in our ultimate goals of creating education opportunities around the globe.

The suggestions from the Forum are timely and very well-aligned with the newly launched ICDE Strategic Plan for 2021-2024. The Strategic Objective number 1 is to: *“Increase the impact of ICDEs advocacy regarding OFDL globally and enable greater regional and national influence through members and partners”*. Strategic Objective number 2 is to: *“Extend the global reach of ICDE membership to underrepresented regions, sectors and stakeholders, as well as underrepresented and disadvantaged learner populations”*. The Strategic Objective number 3 is to: *“Maximise the relevance and value of ICDE to its members through the prioritised areas of quality, OER and innovation in education”*.

The full strategic plan and video introductions from the President and Secretariat can be [accessed here](#).

The input gathered from the ICDE President's Forum 2020 is important to ICDE. To date, it has already been integrated into the 2021/22 activity planning for the ICDE Secretariat through the prioritization and refinement of initiatives.

Moreover, the input has helped to shape the theme of the 2021 Leadership Summit hosted by Open Polytechnic of New Zealand by challenging participants of the leadership summit to the question, Are we flexible enough? Finally, the output from the 2020 Presidents' Forum will serve as an input into the next forum.

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