



INTERNATIONAL
COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND
DISTANCE EDUCATION

GLOBAL PRESIDENTS' FORUM 2024

Summary Report

Author and Editor: Mark Nichols
ICDE President

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Karl Johans gate 5

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Opening addresses.....	6
Discussion 1: New purpose statement.....	8
Discussion 2: The top challenges facing senior leaders across ICDE.....	11
Where to next?.....	13
Appendix: ICDE Strategic Plan 2025-2028.....	14

Executive Summary

At the ICDE Global Presidents' Forum on 5 December 2024, executive leaders from ICDE member institutions convened virtually for the official launch of the new ICDE Strategic Plan 2025-2028.

Delegates were invited to suggest and discuss the implementation of the new strategy through two rounds of structured consultations. The first centered around ICDE's new purpose statement: "*Together we shape inclusive, scalable and sustainable education*". The second addressed top challenges facing senior leaders across ICDE.

The briefing that follows summarizes the outcomes of these discussions, including recommendations for the way forward.

Introduction

The ICDE Global Presidents' Forum is an annual event that brings together global perspectives of those members in senior positions. Attendance is by invitation only, to ensure the views represent those of decision-makers primarily concerned with macro (systematic) and meso (institution-wide) matters. The Forum is held either as an in-person workshop in conjunction with an ICDE Conference or across time-zone friendly Zoom webinars. The 2024 Forum was held virtually across two time-zones in 2024, from the author's perspective (New Zealand time) these were 9pm to 11:30pm Thursday 5 December, and Friday 6am to 8:30am Friday 6 December.

A total of eighteen participants attended the two webinars.

The focus of the 2024 event was to formally launch the 2025 to 2028 ICDE Strategy and invite Forum participants to provide feedback. The Forum agenda then moved on to consider how participants might contribute to together 'shape inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education' and how the ICDE Secretariat might assist ICDE members with this pursuit through its own services and products. The Forum is based primarily on small group conversation and plenary exchange, providing a rich exchange of ideas.

This summary begins with the President's and Secretary General's address, then moves on to participant comments related to the new ICDE mission statement. It concludes with the top challenges identified by participants, which will inform and shape the activities of the Secretariat in supporting ICDE members.

The previous vision statement of ICDE was "To achieve the potential of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning created through our members and learning communities."

The new purpose statement for 2025 to 2028 is "Together we shape the future of inclusive, scalable and sustainable education."

"It is exciting to bring together such high-calibre representatives from the global open and distance learning community, and the deliberations and outputs of this Forum will guide the Secretariat and Board as to the themes of relevance to you all as international leaders.

So, as we welcome people in Aotearoa New Zealand, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa. Nau mai, haere mai."

Mark Nichols, ICDE President



Opening addresses

In his opening presentation Dr Mark Nichols referred back to the 2023 Presidents' Forum held at the World Conference in Costa Rica. He reflected on the challenge posed by then President Neil Fassina, who tasked participants to convey the complexity of modern open, flexible, distance learning (OFDL) environments using messaging that is understandable and accessible by the average person.

Around the same time Tony Bates posted a comment on his blog that drew sharp attention. It was telling, he said, about those institutions that were not represented at the ICDE conference – namely those large online providers, whose education provision essentially is open, distance, and flexible, but who did not see any relevance to ICDE and ODL as we traditionally represent it. Tony observed that

...ICDE still appeals mainly to those institutions solely dedicated to distance education. Nevertheless the vast majority of distance learners are in now in 'conventional' institutions.^[1]

The President's opening address included the following points:

- The terms 'open' and 'distance' no longer mean what they used to mean, nor have the same call to arms they used to be. Global education in 2024 is now a mix of practice, thanks in part to the advances we have seen in connectivity and bandwidth. Streaming lectures are now able to cross distances and open access to education now in ways that were unimaginable when open universities were created.
- There is currently a 'terminological soup,' where 'open' and 'distance' increasingly struggle to find their place among terms used internationally such as 'online,' 'blended,' 'hyflex,' 'smart,' and 'bichronous.' We also see some quality 'online' learning providers growing quickly, many of which do not in any way use the terms 'open' and 'distance,' even though their practice and organisational structures mirror those of open universities.
- The address ended with three key points:
 - ◆ Firstly, the educational context of practice has changed. What used to be traditional and open distance as two poles is now a single continuum with very blurred points across it.
 - ◆ Second, terminology is less helpful. 'Open' and 'distance' have 'in' meanings that unfortunately seal off those outside of the ICDE community. As technology advances, focusing on terminology is less and less helpful to us all.

^[1] [Day 2 of the ICDE conference in Costa Rica | Tony Bates | https://www.tonybates.ca/2023/11/09/day-2-of-the-icde-conference-in-costa-rica/](https://www.tonybates.ca/2023/11/09/day-2-of-the-icde-conference-in-costa-rica/)

- ◆ Finally, we are laying claim to the edgy, social justice position the founders of open and distance education, writers and thinkers such as Charles Wedemeyer, Michael Moore, and others whose theories continue to inspire us. We are still committed to advancing their agenda. In adopting the terms inclusive, scalable, and sustainable, ICDE seeks to continuously advocate quality education for those otherwise unable to access it.

Secretary General Torunn Gjelsvik followed with an overview of ICDE's rich history as an NGO started in 1938, hosted by the Norwegian government since 1988. ICDE has been a consultative partner to UNESCO since 1967 and has more than 340 members and partners worldwide – now across more than 90 countries.

The majority of ICDE membership comes from Asia and Europe (30% or so each), with 12% from Africa, 10% each in North and South America, and 5% in Oceania. Most of the ICDE membership comes from academic institutions. Training and course providers, regional associations, and individual members (including free student membership) round off the ICDE community.

The Secretary General address went on to present the purpose, or 'Why,' of ICDE:

The 'Why' of ICDE is "Inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all."

The "Why" of ICDE represents continuity, as this has always been at the heart of ICDE's sense of identity. The 'problem' ICDE is concerned with aligns strongly with UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The Secretary General opening address included the following points:

- Advocacy for equitable and inclusive access to quality education and lifelong learning is a key activity of ICDE, through the Global Advocacy Campaign. We live in a world where one third of the population still does not have access to the internet, and ICDE is concerned about supporting these contexts as well as those where access is ubiquitous.
- The development of the 2025 to 2028 ICDE Strategic Plan was extremely thorough, featuring open member consultation, a survey, and meetings. The Plan is designed to explain the value proposition of ICDE to a broader audience and reflect institutional openness to a broader set of membership.

This will, in turn, assist with ICDE's own sustainability as an international community.

- The new purpose statement of ICDE is "Together we shape inclusive, scalable and sustainable education." The new Strategic Plan (included in the Appendix) is a one-page overview of ICDE's Purpose, Target Members, Value for Members, Delivery, Organization, and Culture. These in turn shape ICDE's four Strategic Objectives across 2025 to 2028 inclusive.

Discussion 1: New purpose statement

"Together we shape inclusive, scalable and sustainable education"

The first group discussion centred on the new ICDE purpose statement, focusing on the following questions:

- How do we balance harnessing new, disruptive technologies (such as AI), with the need for regulations?
- How do we break the silos between education and other sectors, and form partnerships to achieve SDG4?
- How can we strengthen academic institutions' connection to the SDGs and actively promote your contributions to sustainable development in our advocacy efforts?
- How do we maintain our identities as ODL providers when other universities are going 'online'?

Participants began with open discussion around the purpose statement.

Let's put the terminology aside – and emphasize what we do

Participants were unanimous that the new purpose statement was a helpful departure from terminology and urged that ICDE and its members turn its focus to praxis: "*...we need to shout very loud that is what we are doing... We need to walk the walk - this is what we do.*" One member observed that they personally identified with "*ISS (Inclusive, Scalable, Sustainable) education... Trying to build differences between modes of delivery does not make sense anymore. We need a way of referring to a kind of education that relies on technology that is also inclusive.*" Another participant reminded us that "*We should not get so granular [in our terminology] that we are using terms that the students don't understand; ultimately, it is about the student understanding [of what we do].*" Participants broadly agreed that the terms inclusive, scalable and sustainable were useful as a means of drawing attention to the key issues their countries were facing related to higher education.

The strategic advantage of open universities

One participant observed that their support of the inclusive, scalable and sustainable terms is based on the advantage that open universities have: *"Traditional universities are competing with us, however, our biggest strength is our ability to reach out to marginalized communities. Our major strength is scalability."* Another remarked that one advantage open institutions have is that *"Not everyone puts inclusive at the top of their values, they take it for granted."* Many existing ICDE members already have inclusive, scalable and sustainable education built into the ways they operate, which again demonstrates the relevance of these terms to ICDE's identity.

ICDE's value to members relies on 'togetherness'

The new purpose statement is in itself more inclusive and highlights the role ICDE might play in broadening its membership – and, in turn, the value of ICDE membership. One participant stated that they *"...like the word 'together' because there are some difficult conversations in [country] now. The campuses are empty, people are demanding flexible education in whatever form, but it's seen as being in opposition to the campus. We need to emphasise the togetherness of inclusivity."* A different small group commented on *"...the importance of international collaboration for activities..., to really use the beauty of diversity among our members... [we must] think global but act local."* A further participant remarked that *"...the key reasons why ICDE members join ICDE [is], in many cases, they want to learn from each other and share good practices. They want to work together to shape future development."* Of course, it was also acknowledged by one participant that *"many universities are highly competitive, which may come in the way for collaboration and openness."* However, given ICDE's multi-national membership, many university members are not in active competition.

We need to further explore what inclusive, scalable and sustainable mean

Several comments were made related to the three terms, and the need to further unpack them. Related to the term 'inclusive,' the comment was made that *"...inclusive [must] include the economic situation of students;"* another reminded participants that *"Inclusiveness is context dependent."* The concept of 'scalable' was also commented on, one participant stating that *"Scalable requires different ways of working;"* another questioning *"Does scalable work against quality? How do we balance it? How do we standardise a framework across what evaluators want?"* Finally, one participant noted that *"the key term is 'sustainable.' It's a fact, because of economic, environmental, and social issues. Sustainable needs to be kept on all three levels [of macro-, meso-, and micro-]. We need to break through the silo of thinking there is only one type of sustainability."* The three terms provide excellent 'hooks' for further exploration of key education themes. Overall, the question was raised *"how do we interpret and implement them? The terms may have different meanings in various contexts and among members."*

Overall, there was enthusiastic endorsement of the new purpose statement and its ability to broaden ICDE membership. The scale of the challenge in praxis was highlighted by one participant whose context was such that they were concerned with inclusivity across multiple cultures across various islands; *"...scalability is also important, with between 600 and 700 thousand students."* The issue of sustainability across this form of operation is also

certainly key to maintaining and further extending educational provision. These are the types of contexts ICDE is uniquely able to support across its community.

Response to the four key questions

The four additional focus questions elicited some interesting and helpful observations:

- There is considerable uncertainty in higher education around the globe. Sustainability is in flux; financial and student engagement issues are front of mind, as are strategies for inclusion in lifelong learning. One key challenge is how education can be – and be perceived to be – both scalable and high quality.
- We need members to shape inclusive, scalable and sustainable education for themselves. One of the valuable functions of ICDE is providing the forums in which these terms and strategies for them can be explored and debated.
- AI is an example of where ICDE can encourage ‘glocal’ (global, interweaved with local) conversation. There is a temptation across some countries to regulate, rather than encourage, AI use. In some countries education is “*teacher-led*,” with massive schisms across technology early-adopters and those who are “*scared*.” In others, perhaps all, plagiarism is on the rise.
- Industry partnerships provide a promising means of promoting SDG 4. This requires intentional and strategic leadership, and a willingness to understand the design of each industry and its skill needs. Work-integrated learning is an avenue of inclusive, scalable and sustainable education members are interested in exploring.
- The terms inclusive, scalable and sustainable are also relevant across the schooling sector. Open schools – and, arguably, schooling in general – can also add to the engagement of ICDE.

Three key takeaways

Three key takeaways from participant comments to discussion one are as follows:

1. **Emphasis on practical implementation:** participants agreed that the new purpose statement should focus on practical actions rather than just terminology. They highlighted the importance of demonstrating inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education in practice, rather than getting bogged down in definitions.
2. **Strategic advantage of incumbent ICDE members:** Open universities have a unique strength in reaching marginalized communities and offering scalable education. This advantage sets them apart from traditional universities, which may not prioritize inclusivity to the same extent but are increasingly concerned with inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability.
3. **Value of togetherness and collaboration:** The new purpose statement emphasizes the importance of togetherness and international collaboration. Participants noted that ICDE's value lies in its ability to bring members together to share best practices, learn from each other, and collectively shape the future of education.

The terms inclusive, scalable and sustainable align with SGD 4 and provide a useful framework for engaging with international issues associated with technology adoption, globalized solutions, and education quality. Ultimately, as one participant said, *“We need to design education that is inclusive, scalable and sustainable.”*

Discussion 2: The top challenges facing senior leaders across ICDE

“We engage institutions from top to bottom”

The second group discussion focused on those issues participants as senior leaders in inclusive, scalable and sustainable education were faced with. Engagement was concerned with the following:

- The top five challenges currently faced as an educational leader.
- Potential services and products that ICDE could provide in support of its members.
- How ICDE might better engage the whole institution - segmentation of needs and interests?

A poll invited participants to identify their top three challenges as educational leaders, based on six possibilities.

Possible challenge	N=	Percentage
<i>Funding/financial constraints</i>	11	61%
“New to ODFL”	2	11%
<i>Recognition / quality assurance</i>	11	61%
<i>Scalable delivery</i>	10	56%
Staff training	9	50%
Student recruitment	7	39%

Table One: Possible challenges to educational leaders, from participant poll (top three italicized)

Overall, the issues identified as most significant were ‘Funding/financial constraints,’ ‘Recognition/quality assurance,’ and ‘Scalable delivery.’

Participant comments were particularly concerned with the challenges of quality assurance. In many countries the main issue of improving the inclusiveness, scalability and sustainability of education was assuring decision-makers that it could be achieved while maintaining quality standards. In one country, *“The government is actually questioning: How can we use distance learning to scale the offer of education while keeping the quality?”* Another participant mentioned the development of a quality assurance toolkit for distance education

and remarked that *"the challenge is having regulators of higher institutions buy-in to encourage their member institutions to use the tool kit."*

It was observed by one participant that *"Technology is missing among the top challenges, [in particular] the challenge of AI. The need for policies/regulations and harnessing innovations could have been one of the alternatives."*

A second poll focused on how ICDE might best engage and support its members.

ICDE services and products	N=	Percentage
Advocacy campaigns	7	39%
<i>Collaborative projects</i>	11	61%
<i>Conferences</i>	12	67%
Consultancy	6	33%
<i>Expert networks</i>	11	61%
Insight reports	8	44%
<i>Webinars</i>	11	61%
Workshops/training	8	44%

Table Two: Possible ICDE services and products, from participant poll (top three italicized)

Here the top outcomes were 'Collaborative projects,' 'Expert networks,' and 'Webinars.' Participants commented on the value of shared experiences, not just in practice but sharing business models and project-based initiatives. It was helpful to see mention of the Technology Innovation Network – TIN^[1] – as an example of how ICDE might empower members to facilitate international collaboration.

One participant noted that *"global-level collaboration is very valuable,"* which seems a key theme across those in the Presidents' Forum 2024. It was stated that even ICDE's very largest members benefit from *"insight from others to learn how to assure quality at scale."* Another participant shared that they are *"interested in sharing about personalization of learning and adaptive learning,"* and another urged we seek to *"integrate OER with other aspects of openness (open research, open science, and others)."* Also proposed were *"opportunities to share our success stories."* These, and other themes such as AI, provide the sort of agenda that will continue to draw members together, and that our Secretariat will continue to promote and facilitate.

The last comment goes to one participant who said, *"we need to shout louder who we are, ICDE."* The purpose of ICDE remains globally significant, in pursuit of SDG 4 and the ongoing efforts of its members to, together, shape inclusive, scalable and sustainable education. It seems from the 2024 Presidents' Forum that confidence in and alignment with this purpose will carry the international community of ICDE into a mutually prosperous future.

^[1] TIN is also described by Professor Julie Lindsay as standing for 'Tangible, Innovative, Noticeable.'

Where to next?

In his introduction to the 2024 ICDE Annual Report, the ICDE President wrote these lines:

The forces of change move at different speeds. Some like Generative Artificial Intelligence sweep across rapidly, bringing chaos alongside promise (some exaggerated, some all too real) and requiring swift attention. Others, like the gradual erosion of 'distance education' and the almost universal move toward more open practices, take place more insidiously. The ICDE community is extremely well placed to monitor and respond to – and perhaps even embrace and reshape - these and other changes that affect all of our member institutions.

The 2024 Presidents' Forum likewise shows some global shifts across the ICDE community, which help shape the activities of ICDE.

- The challenge of demonstrating how scale can be achieved without sacrificing quality. This is arguably a matter of perception, however sharing good practice and consolidating evidence would be very helpful to members across various countries. Could evidence be assembled from global practice to the benefit of all members?
- The challenge of funding and financial performance, especially for those ICDE members whose traditional advantage in open education practice is being eroded by traditional universities extending into distance education modalities. Are there instances of national practices that encourage collaboration across universities, and might there be models that demonstrate how open universities and their traditional counterparts might together improve the reach of quality education?
- The challenge of achieving scalable delivery. Some educational models have higher variable step costs; others rely on large up-front investment requiring high student volumes for break-even, though demand may not be there for some subject areas. Would it be valuable for members to explore and share different models of delivery that might scale under different scenarios?
- The challenge of new disruptive technologies. Generative Artificial Intelligence is yet to find a settled place across education practice; Gen AI is unlike any so-called 'disruptive' technology seen to date. How might members draw together to share experiences, policies, practices in ways that demonstrate mature engagement with GenAI, rather than speculative or uncertain conclusions?

- The challenge of extending our membership, without compromising our identity. Various comments were made about the value of broadening ICDE's appeal across those institutions whose activities and innovations integrate those of open university members. Some participants suggested extending the ICDE tent still further, to include the schooling sector. It could be that conversations related to inclusive, scalable and sustainable education are common to all education sectors. Can the new ICDE purpose statement be supportive of a much broader membership?

Some of these are old challenges, but some have a new freshness about them. The forces of change move at different speeds, and the Presidents' Forum is an ideal opportunity to take the pulse of senior leaders across ICDE member institutions and partners.

What's next is really a question needing to be answered from the members. Across the Presidents' Forum is the helpful observation that ICDE promises the benefits of a global community. Collaborative projects, the ICDE World Conference, expert networks, and webinars were all identified by participants in the 2024 Presidents' Forum as being those activities that will best engage and support its members. The Technology and Innovation Network (TIN) is an excellent example of a member-generated initiative, supported by the Secretariat; it is clear that other similar initiatives might also be supported.

ICDE members have a global network of experienced leaders available to them. All are committed to promoting inclusive, scalable and sustainable education. The Secretariat is eager to facilitate collaboration and promote joint responses to the challenges currently facing our community. The final comment for this summary report reflects ICDE's Delivery statement from the 2025 Strategic Plan:

We provide a global arena for the exchange of innovation and ideas.

All ICDE members and representatives, are a central part of that 'we.'

ICDE STRATEGIC PLAN

PURPOSE	<p>TOGETHER WE SHAPE INCLUSIVE, SCALABLE AND SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION</p>	<p>STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES 2025 - 2028</p>
TARGET MEMBERS	<p>We engage institutions from top to bottom</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>We aim for institutions (Higher Ed and Tertiary) with resources, expertise, ideas and engagement</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>We engage the CEO/President - a decision maker with interest in borderless collaboration</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>We segment the needs of members based on up-to-date knowledge of trends and interests</p> </div> </div>	<p>1 Increased global impact from ICDE members shaping the future of education</p>
VALUE FOR MEMBERS	<p>"ICDE helps us with our transformation and growth"</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>"We have a valuable voice in a global community of change-makers shaping the future of education"</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>"We get ideas, insights and knowledge for the design and delivery of inclusive, scalable and sustainable education"</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>"ICDE enables and empowers us to learn, collaborate and innovate across borders and sectors"</p> </div> </div>	<p>2 Increased ICDE brand recognition through the showcase of ICDE members' contribution to inclusive, scalable and sustainable education.</p>
ICDE'S DELIVERY	<p>We provide a global arena for the exchange of innovation and ideas</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>We communicate diverse stories that engage and inspire</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>We facilitate advocacy, events and collaborative projects.</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>We build a trustworthy brand through globally relevant quality content and expertise.</p> </div> </div>	<p>3 Extended delivery of quality services and products through a global arena that enables and empowers members to innovate and grow.</p>
ORGANIZATION	<p>We have a scalable model for the delivery of our products</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>We have relevant insight & relations</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>We have a mighty team with the core competency.</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>We outsource parts of our delivery to partners and members.</p> </div> </div>	<p>4 Sustained and scalable model of ICDE services and products for long-term growth.</p>
CULTURE	<p>Building a Culture of Care, Curiosity and Challenge.</p>	



INTERNATIONAL
COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND
DISTANCE EDUCATION

**ICDE - International Council for
Open and Distance Education,**

Karl Johans gate 5,
0154 Oslo, Norway

Email: icde@icde.org

Telephone: +47 22 06 26 32

Enterprise Registry Number: NO971286512
