**INTERNATIONAL
COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND
DISTANCE EDUCATION**

# GLOBAL PRESIDENTS' FORUM 2025

## SUMMARY REPORT

**AUTHOR AND EDITOR:**
MARK NICHOLS, ICDE PRESIDENT

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# Executive Summary



Podcast summary: Scaling Access Does Not Mean Lower Quality *(AI generated using Google Notebook LM)*

Close to forty global leaders in Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (OFDL) gathered for the Global Presidents Forum (GPF) in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand in November 2025. The GPF is an annual event hosted by ICDE, the International Council for Open and Distance Education.

*"Each year the Global President Forum discusses areas of global significance so that we can develop a joint voice and suggest solutions from global perspectives and expertise."*
*- Mark Nichols*

The GPF 2025 addressed the question, Scale and quality: is there a conundrum?

Participants were provided with pre-reading and four key questions related to matters of quality. The GPF concluded that there are no quality differences between OFDL and traditional forms of education, and that the distinction across these two is becoming less relevant. Quality needs to be considered in terms of education access, flexibility, reach, and benefits to students and society. As education models tend more towards blended, traditional means of quality measurement will need to adapt in ways that will likely favour OFDL.

**Mark Nichols, ICDE President**

# Introduction

The International Council for Open and Distance Education's purpose is "Together we shape inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education". In pursuit of this purpose, ICDE engages its senior members in conversations aligned with its value statements to members:

- We have a valuable voice in a global community of change-makers shaping the future of education.

- We get ideas, insights and knowledge for the design and delivery of inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education.

- ICDE enables and empowers us to learn, collaborate and innovate across borders and sectors.

The ICDE Global Presidents' Forum (GPF) is an annual exclusive event that brings together the perspectives of executive leaders from ICDE member institutions. 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 2025 GPF took place as part of the pre-conference events for the ICDE World Conference held in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. Thirty-nine global leaders in the ICDE community registered for the event.

The 2025 Presidents' Forum addresses the following theme:

*Scale and quality: is there a conundrum*?

Many ICDE members report an ongoing focus on quality systems, particularly where there is general suspicion around the scale of enrolments and concern that the quantity of students might indicate a deficit of quality outcomes. In general, this suspicion is twofold:

1) Are large providers of inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education taking academic shortcuts?
2) Given educational outcomes such as course and programme completions tend to be lower for open universities and practitioners of distance and online education, should they be funded at the same rate?

This latter issue takes New Zealand as an example, because as in other countries, metrics such as course completions, programme completions, retention, and progression rates are used to evaluate the effectiveness of public funding (see [Educational performance indicators for TEOs | Tertiary Education Commission](#)).

The Global Presidents' Forum 2025 considered how those dedicated to inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education should respond to the perception of poor-quality outcomes and

explored the phenomenon of lower course and programme completions for open providers. Four key questions were addressed during the Forum session

1) Is the perceived lower quality of OFDL, in inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education, valid?

2) Who are those with that perception? Who do we need to influence?

3) What evidence does the inclusive, scalable, and sustainable community for higher education need to assemble?

4) Are lower completion outcomes inevitable for open education? How might our models adapt to improve outcomes?

Suggested pre-reading to inform a global response to these questions were:

- [Quality Assurance at Mega Universities | SpringerLink](https://link.springer.com/rwe/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_40) | https://link.springer.com/rwe/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_40 (Darojat & Li, 2023).

- [Quality Assurance Systems for Digital Higher Education in Europe | SpringerLink](https://link.springer.com/rwe/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_41) | https://link.springer.com/rwe/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_41 (Ubachs & Henderikx, 2023).

- [Quality Assurance in Online, Open, and Distance Education | SpringerLink](https://link.springer.com/rwe/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_39) | https://link.springer.com/rwe/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_39 (Jung, 2023).

- [The Mega-Universities Disrupting Higher Education](https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanpenprase/2024/12/02/the-mega-universities-disrupting-higher-education/) | https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanpenprase/2024/12/02/the-mega-universities-disrupting-higher-education/ (Penprase, 2024).

- Chapter 3.1, "From Small Residential to Mega-University: The Story of SNHU" ICDE-PDF-Mega-universities-and-opening-education-by-design.pdf

The final pre-reading item, a case study by Paul LeBlanc (previous President of Southern New Hampshire University in the United States), outlines the growth – and quality outcomes – of SNHU's online model noting that "In some communities, our graduation rates are four to five times higher than other providers *serving the very same student*." (LeBlanc, 2025, p. 171).

The GPF began with an address by ICDE President Dr Mark Nichols, introducing the Forum and framing the two sections for group discussion. The two sections were based around the four key questions, pairing questions 1 and 2, and 3 and 4.

# Opening Address

In his opening address ICDE President Dr Mark Nichols presented the forum concept and the four key questions. The 2025 GPF theme was based on a concern raised by ICDE members in the previous 2024 GPF report:

> 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*" (Nichols, 2024, pp. 11-12).

Each of the pre-reading sources was briefly presented before group activities for Discussion One and Discussion Two took place. Participants were asked to discuss the questions at their tables, with ICDE representatives assigned to each table to take notes. Mentimeter was also used to capture feedback and insights.

An opening Mentimeter survey asked participants to consider their own institution's relationship to quality. Results are shown in Figure One.
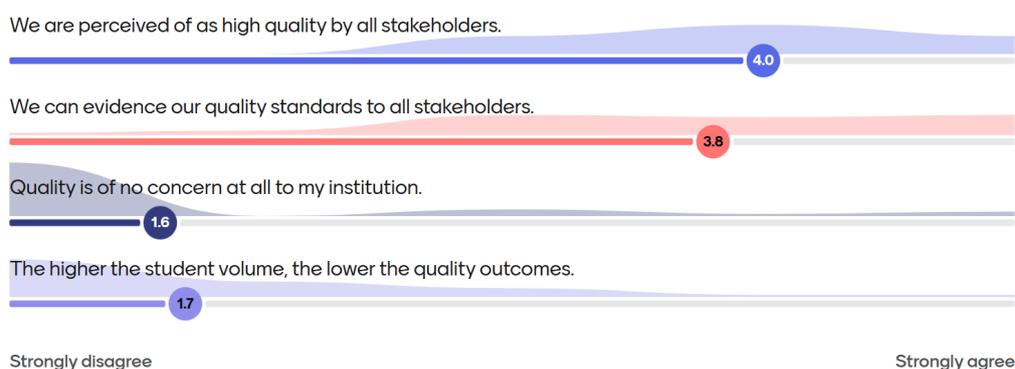


*Figure one: Participants' response to opening questions*

Most participants sensed their institutions were ranked as high quality across their stakeholders, with no rating lower than a 3 on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Slightly fewer were able to evidence their quality standards to all stakeholders (weighted average of 3.76). Most participants were concerned about quality, with an average of 1.57 in response to the statement, "Quality is of no concern to my

institution." There was also rejection to the statement "The higher the student volume, the lower the quality outcomes" at 1.73.

# Discussion One

## Is the perceived lower quality of OFDL, in inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education, valid? Who do we need to influence?

Participants were in full agreement that the perceived lower quality of OFDL is invalid. One response stated that "It is a fallacy to assume that more quantity necessarily means less quality. Expanding access and reaching more learners does not have to come at the expense of excellence".

Many participants pointed out that OFDL increases the reach of higher education to the most disadvantaged, who often face "extra challenges". In the words of one, "Conventional mode institutions take pride in their exclusivity in admission, which is anathema" to OFDL providers. These learners include immigrants, prisoners, people with social anxiety, disabilities, young mothers, and those already with employment responsibilities. As another participant contributed, "We need to take control the biased conversation around quality and redefine it from a non-elite perspective." Advocating for inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education might involve alternative quality metrics that prioritise access to education and highlight the special qualities inherent in their models.

Regardless of the perception, participants agreed that OFDL providers have nothing to hide. Central quality functions and transparent internal and external reviews, based on appropriate metrics, are welcome. It was pointed out that quality metrics are usually based on face-to-face education as the yardstick. That said, OFDL should continue to maintain high standards in programme outcomes and measuring indicators of quality. Metrics, funding models, assumptions around operating models, research and ranking criteria all tend to favour on-campus provision. Adjusting these indicators would be, according to one participant, "significant" in that they would need to be reflected across multiple fronts. The inertia against changing quality indicators should not be underestimated! One participant, with a certain irony, noted that OFDL providers "counter-intuitively, may be scrutinized more than [traditional] providers who are historically perceived as 'high quality'."

Some comments indicated that, while OFDL quality might be perceived as lower in quality this "need not" be the case, hinting that quality _can_ be lower. Overcoming poor quality is as much a matter of the design of education systems than it is locked into the nature of PFDL and inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education systems. Innovation can challenge the perception of lower quality; one participant shared that "ways to address the perception are through the use of digital technology, adherence to strong quality frameworks, and being

more progressive in innovation by way of micro credentials". Applying Generative Artificial Intelligence was also mentioned as a means of improving perceived education quality.

Many comments were also made about the quality of graduates and alumni as being the ultimate proof that quality education is being provided in inclusive, scalable, and sustainable higher education institutions, with one mentioning the extensive international graduates of their university.

> *"Alumni have helped us to demonstrate our quality and impact."*
> - GPF 2025 participant

Some international evidence was brought to bear. One participant mentioned the recent XXI AIESAD (Ibero-American Association for Higher Distance Education) Regional meeting, which "showed that access and quality can advance together": ([AIESAD Meetings - AIESAD](https://aiesad.org/encuentros-aiesad/) | https://aiesad.org/encuentros-aiesad/). Another mentioned the research status of UNISA, the University of South Africa, which is one of the six research-intensive universities in its region.

Ultimately, the question itself was challenged: ought we be looking for answers to the question, "What is success?" Bringing students into the conversation of how education should be designed and measured will certainly change the nature of perceived quality.

In response to the matter of who to influence, participants were able to provide a comprehensive list, some stakeholders here repeated under different titles:

- → Academic peers
- → Business community
- → Employers
- → Funders
- → Government
- → Industry
- → Parents
- → Policymakers
- → Regulators
- → Students
- → Teachers
- → Traditional universities

The point was made that influence should include traditional education providers, including "the academics in the best of regular mode education". This group in particular needs to be made aware that "the role of the teacher is changing". From this list, it appears a great deal of advocacy is needed, on different fronts. Part of the need is to assure employers that they

should consider graduates from traditional and "distance mode" graduates as being at least equivalent.

Overall, there seemed a certain inevitability around the changing nature of education that providers of inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education are spearheading. Quality systems that do not recognise the unique contribution OFDL makes to the overall education system are out of step with the future of provision.

# Discussion Two

## What evidence do we need to assemble to convince stakeholders of our quality? How might our models adapt?

Participants advocated the gathering and sharing of data, specifically those related to academic performance, student engagement, industry connection, and graduate destinations. Research into the alignment of inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education models with the concerns of stakeholders, with an emphasis on the contribution made to societal and political solutions, was emphasised.

Research into the parity of assessment, credit equivalence, curriculum, student outcomes, and cost-effectiveness of OFDL was called for. The testimony of participants is that the curricula can be identical, and that access to employment and contribution to a nation's prosperity and Gross Domestic Product are substantial. Alongside these benefits are the contribution OFDL makes to social justice and access. At least one university, UNISA, compares its own analytics with those of contact universities.

> *"We should show evidence that OFDL attract a lot of students who would not get their education without OFDL."*
> - GPF 2025 participant

Telling the stories of students and graduates was a prominent theme. Faculty qualifications and research outcomes were also mentioned, as was the use of specialised quality frameworks designed for OFDL models.

Insofar as this evidence has been presented and quality concerns remain, it is possible that in the words of one participant "we are presenting the wrong evidence". One promising avenue suggested was researching the extent to which OFDL benefits the national economy, particularly in that OFDL "allows more students to combine work and study." Drawing

attention to the benefits of study flexibility, with multiple entry and exit provisions and the transferability of credit across universities, was also emphasised.

Ultimately it was the distinctive advantages of OFDL that stood out in responses to the question of what evidence we need to assemble. On the assumption that the quality is at the least equivalent to more traditional forms of education, the positive contribution to economic growth, the extended reach, and direct student benefit were highlighted.

The challenge is really one of gathering evidence of immediate relevance to various stakeholders and communicating it clearly. One respondent suggested getting rid of the term 'distance', emphasising instead the flexibility and openness elements; drawing from the ICDE purpose, matters of inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability of education models seem pertinent. There is clearly a need for further work in this area.

# Further Ideas

## What else should we all consider when addressing quality? What practical advice do you have?

In closing, participants were asked for any further ideas not addressed earlier on the Forum. Many significant insights were shared.

→ **Alumni**. OFDL providers have a significant alumnus, often already in employment. These might be drawn upon for evidence as to the quality and benefits of OFDL.

→ **Assessment**. The security and validity of assessment, particularly in the context of Generative Artificial Intelligence, was mentioned. This is a real challenge to the perceived quality of OFDL, where assessment techniques are often facilitated remotely.

→ **Blended models**. Instead of trying to differentiate between OFDL and traditional forms of education, we might instead explore what a quality framework might resemble when education models are fragmented. One participant suggested this be framed as emphasising flexibility over distance.

→ **Contextuality of quality**. Instead of a broad-brush consideration of quality, criteria might be developed that better reflect the context in which education takes place.

→ **Design of education models**. Consideration of the workings of an education model might provide an alternative to preset quality criteria, and encourage universities to better critique how well they educate students.

→ **Differentiate learners**. Many quality systems assume school-leavers; alternatively, criteria might be developed that better represent the needs of adult learners.

→ **Recognise the innovative.** Quality frameworks tend to be conservative; alongside this, quality systems ought to identify the value of innovation in teaching and learning, particularly as technology continues to advance.

→ **Return on investment.** Proving the ROI of OFDL would go a long way toward convincing stakeholders of its worth.

→ **Working with industry.** OFDL providers with a national reach have the opportunity to work with entire industries in support of workforce development, alongside academic programmes.

# Where To Next?

The 2025 Global Presidents' Forum provided a wealth of ideas and perspectives. It is suggested that researchers and experts take the initiative to assemble further evidence of quality in OFDL and contribute this evidence to the global OFDL community. Far from being on the periphery, inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education models are becoming mainstream. Quality frameworks must further develop in recognition of these new models, which increasingly resemble OFDL practice.

OFDL practitioners can afford to take an assertive view of quality matters, confident in the benefits of their work in terms of improving the reach of effective education and improving the economic wellbeing of their country.

> *"It is a fallacy to assume that more quantity necessarily means less quality. Expanding access does not have to come at the expense of excellence."*
> - GPF 2025 participant

Finally, participants were asked to provide a one-word reflection on the GPF session. The word cloud is here presented as Figure Two.



*Figure Two: Word cloud of participants' one-word reflections on the GPF session.*

One final point. In preparing the podcast summary of this report, Google Notebook LM developed this analogy that may be helpful to readers:

> Think of education like a **transportation system**. Traditional universities are like a **high-end boutique train**—very exclusive, with a fixed route and limited seating, which people use to judge the "quality" of travel. Open and distance education is like a **massive, high-speed rail network** with countless entry and exit points. Just because the rail network carries thousands more people to different destinations at different times doesn't mean the engineering is "lower quality" than the boutique train; it simply serves a much larger, more diverse population that the train could never reach.

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# Participants

The following institutions were invited to be represented by their executive leaders in the 2025 Global Presidents Forum:

| | |
|---|---|
| D2L | Australia |
| ODLAA - Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia | Australia |
| Western Caspian University | Azerbaijan |
| ABED - Brazilian Association of Distance Education | Brazil |
| Canadian Digital Learning Research Association | Canada |
| Contact North \| Contact Nord | Canada |
| Okanagan College | Canada |
| Commonwealth of Learning | Canada |
| The Open University of China | China |
| The Central Agricultural Broadcasting and Television School | China |
| Tianjin Open University | China |
| Zhejiang Open University | China |
| UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education (IITE) | China |
| Private Technical University of Loja | Ecuador |
| University of the South Pacific | Fiji |
| Bavarian Virtual University (VHB) | Germany |
| School of Open Learning, University of Delhi | India |
| Birla Institute of Technology & Science Pilani | India |
| Universitas Terbuka | Indonesia |
| The Open University of Japan | Japan |
| Korea National Open University | Korea |
| Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation | Malaysia |
| Victoria University of Wellington | New Zealand |
| Te Aho O Te Kura Pounamu | New Zealand |
| Te Kunenga Ki Pūrehuroa Massey University | New Zealand |
| Open Polytechnic | New Zealand |
| National Open University Of Nigeria | Nigeria |
| Norvalid | Norway |
| NOOA | Norway |
| Western Pacific University | Papua New Guinea |
| Department of Education-Flexible Open and Distance Education PNG | Papua New Guinea |
| Trinity University of Asia | Philippines |
| University of the Philippines Open University | Philippines |
| University of South Africa | South Africa |
| Korea National Open University | South Korea |
| EDEN / Open University of Catalonia (UOC) | Spain |
| Universidad Loyola | Spain |
| Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University | United Arab Emirates |
| University of Leeds | United Kingdom |
| Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education | United States |

| Ho Chi Minh City Open University | Vietnam |
| Zimbabwe Open University | Zimbabwe |

# AI statement

This report was drafted in full without AI assistance, with the exceptions of the the podcast summary (based on a version of this document excluding the Google Notebook LM analogy) and the Google Notebook LM analogy of the transportation system.