Adventures of a former Open University Vice-Chancellor in International Development

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By Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning

Introduction

Thank you so much for this invitation. During my time as Vice-Chancellor I very much appreciated the existence and work of the AOUG. Those were the days when the OU put in place the University-run alumni operation. That serves an important purpose but it seemed to me important to encourage AOUG, as an independent association to continue its work, which has – or had in my day as VC – a stronger academic focus with a journal and meetings such as this.

However, I am not going to give you an academic lecture. My title is Adventures of a former OU Vice-Chancellor in International Development and these remarks will be by turns autobiographical, anecdotal and analytical.

There is life after being Vice-Chancellor of the Open University! Looking back my eleven years at the OU were undoubtedly the high point of my career for both achievement and enjoyment. It was also my longest tenure in any job. The OU is an extraordinary institution and serving it was a huge privilege. Before I came to the OU I had been associated, either as student or staff member, with half a dozen universities in Canada, France and the UK. None of them came close to the OU in idealism, student centeredness and intellectual rigour in both teaching and administration. Nor did any give students such a large role in the running of the university.

Another very rewarding feature of the OU was the longevity of its students. In other universities students are there for three or four years. Some become active in student and university affairs in their second year but then focus on other things in their final year, so you are dealing with students who know little about how the committees work and have no institutional memory. Contrast this to the OU where OUSA has a better institutional memory than most of the staff! This not only gives more maturity and a greater sense of common purpose to debates in Senate and Council, but also allows OU staff to get to know well some of the student and graduate representatives on these bodies.
Distance Learning: an International Phenomenon

So heading the OU for eleven years was a most enjoyable privilege. But I have also had a very interesting time since I left in 2001 and that is what I shall talk about today. My OU colleagues had assumed that I would do ‘something international’ when I finished my term as VC. This was partly because they credited me with having expanded the international reach of the OU. Some of you were active in the University during the 1990s and can judge whether that is true.

My own view is that I simply helped to bring more systematic processes to trends that were happening anyway and, in particular, to ensure that OU students, wherever they were, received a high level of service and were fully integrated into all activities. During my time as VC the OU became an increasingly international organisation as the number of people studying overseas grew, as did the proportion of them who were not UK expatriates. I understand that today the OU has 60,000 students overseas, which is the equivalent of several large conventional universities.

It has been said that all new movements are by nature international in their early days and this was certainly true of open universities. When I enrolled in a part-time Master’s programme in Educational Technology in Montreal in the early 1970s, the infant OU was by far the most interesting and attractive place in the world to do the internship that the programme required. The OU was applying technology to higher education at scale. So I came over here for my internship in 1972 and spent the summer working as an unpaid visiting lecturer in the Institute of Educational Technology.

That first contact with the OU was a life-changing experience. I was deeply inspired by the OU’s idealism, its scale, its professionalism and its use of the media. Three months of working at Walton Hall and at the Bath summer school were a conversion experience. I returned to Canada no longer at ease in the old dispensation and made a career switch to distance learning.

I worked successively for two Canadian open universities, Quebec’s Télé-université and Alberta’s Athabasca University. Since these institutions were the only open universities in their jurisdictions we had to go to international meetings in order to meet people facing the same challenges and opportunities. The OU quickly emerged as the world’s point of reference – the sun in the global solar system of distance learning – and I maintained contact with OU colleagues even as my career took me to conventional universities in Canada.

I was heading Laurentian University in Ontario when I was appointed VC of the OU in 1990. It is symbolic of the OU’s international spirit that having found me in Canada it went to South Africa for my successor, Brenda Gourley and discovered her successor, Martin Bean our current Vice-Chancellor, in the United States – although he is from Australia.

All this is to say that moving into distance learning had given me an international outlook which was further reinforced by presiding over the rapid internationalisation of the OU during the 1990s.
A Career Change

I had given little thought to what I would do after my contract as OU VC finished in 2002. But in June 2000 I received a phone call from John Vereker, the Permanent Secretary of the Department of International Development, DFID. I had got to know him well in his earlier appointment as Permanent Secretary in the Department of Education.

The purpose of his phone call was to draw my attention to an advertisement in The Economist for the post of Assistant Director-General (ADG) of UNESCO for Education. He explained that the UK had recently rejoined UNESCO and would be happy to see a UK national in this senior post. He also stressed that this was an open competition and that the UK would not lobby for me in any way. However, he did bring the UK’s Ambassador to UNESCO, David Stanton, over for a lunch in London to tell me more about the organisation.

Although UNESCO had a reputation for being rather disorganised and hyper-political, especially compared to the OECD on the other side of the River Seine in Paris, I was sufficiently intrigued to give it a shot and sent in an application. I discovered UNESCO’s administrative weaknesses very quickly since I heard nothing, not even an acknowledgement, for several months, after which I was called for interview at three days’ notice.

I negotiated a new interview date to fit my busy OU schedule, as I had to do again when I was offered the job in early December 2000. The Director-General wanted me to start on January 1st. I negotiated that back to July 1st 2001 because I had no desire to cause difficulties for the OU by leaving in a precipitate fashion. But I agreed to come over to Paris for one or two days every two weeks to familiarise myself with UNESCO and become a frequent traveller on Eurostar for six months.

The UNESCO Years

UNESCO proved to be a most interesting contrast to the OU. UNESCO and the OU probably carried a heavier freight of idealism than any other major educational bodies established in the latter part of the 20th century. UNESCO was created in the late 1940s to give practical expression to the general desire for a better, more peaceful, and more just world after the horrors of World War II. The same impetus gave rise to the creation of the UN itself and the articulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was one of UNESCO’s guiding documents.

UNESCO’s own Charter echoes the mood of those times as this excerpt shows:

*That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.*

*That the ... war ...was made possible by the denial of the democratic principles of the dignity, equality and mutual respect of men, and by the propagation, in their place, through ignorance and prejudice, of the doctrine of inequality of men and races;*
That the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern.

Unfortunately, this idealism was derailed almost immediately by the Cold War and the twisting of these words to camouflage some nasty regimes. It became a fair bet that any country calling itself a democratic republic was anything but democratic.

In practical terms the hassles between East and West, expressed in the contest for influence between the United States and the Soviet Union, did much to define the internal workings of UNESCO. The best book on the subject was written by Richard Hoggart, the most recent UK national before me to hold a post of Assistant Director-General. He was well known for his earlier book *The Uses of Literacy*.

I found that his brilliant book on UNESCO in the 1970s, entitled *UNESCO: An Idea and its Servants*, was still an accurate portrayal of the psychology of the institution even after the end of the Cold War. This was odd, because the ideological battlefield of Hoggart’s time had become an ideological desert by the turn of the century. In UNESCO’s early days, perhaps in order to blunt the clash of ideologies between East and West, countries sent some of their best intellectuals to represent them at UNESCO. Its first Director-General, the British scientist Julian Huxley, was a good example of this.

However, as post-War idealism waned and all governments took a tighter grip on what was being done in their name, the nature of UNESCO was changed – more radically than people realised at the time – by what is called the Japanese Amendment to its constitution. This essentially said that representatives of governments, rather than poets, artists or scientists should sit on UNESCO’s governing bodies. The election of Koichiro Matsuura as Director-General in 1999 symbolised the completion of this change. A Japanese foreign affairs official, Matsuura was wise in the ways of intergovernmental horse-trading but would not consider himself either an intellectual or an idealist.

There were four other sector ADGs: for Science, Culture, Social Sciences and Communications/Information. Our backgrounds ran the gamut from bureaucrats to intellectuals; I was somewhere in the middle. Together with them I served under Matsuura for my four years as ADG and we got on well. ‘Served under’ is a good term because in UNESCO, as in all UN organisations, everything is done in the name of the Secretary-General or the Director-General. You could say, of course, that all administrative actions in a university are done in the name of the vice-chancellor, but in practice there is considerable delegation of power in universities.

At UNESCO, however, an earlier French Director-General had ensured that all real power remained in the Director-General’s office. For someone like me coming to UNESCO after seventeen years as a university head this was frustrating.

In particular, having run the OU, a larger organisation than UNESCO, for eleven years, I greatly resented not being able to choose my own senior staff after due process. Instead, Matsuura lumbered me with some weak people by making one or two bad senior appointments over my shoulder. I had to do the best I could to operate the Education Sector with these folk, even though some of them were less competent than those they had to supervise.
UNESCO has many excellent and dedicated professionals who, to use Hoggart’s words, serve the idea of UNESCO faithfully and competently despite often dysfunctional management and administration. The fundamental problem, as I noted, is that there is no effective system of delegation. I tried to give my directors the authority and power to match their responsibilities but it was hard to make it stick when the notion of delegation was refused at the top of the organisation.

The OU, like UNESCO, was founded on an ideal: to express the noble idea that higher education should be ‘open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods and open as to ideas’. It is, however, radically different from UNESCO in being one of the most modern and enlightened organisations in managerial and administrative terms, having striven successfully to stay at the forefront of good practice since its inception.

But once I adjusted to being a figurehead with responsibilities but little real power, the job was very interesting. Although in Paris an ADG was treated as a kind of superior janitor in the bureaucracy, when visiting the Member States he or she was an important personage.

I note at this point that if you work in an international organisation at a senior level you must expect to travel extensively. Reviewing my travel log I find that from the time that I joined UNESCO in 2001 until I arrived in London from the Maldives yesterday I have taken over 900 flights and spent just less than the equivalent of 200 24-hour days in the air. Fortunately I enjoy travelling and am little bothered by jetlag. I have now visited a total of 110 countries and all but six of the 54 countries of the Commonwealth, which I serve now.

Inevitably as a senior official, whether in UNESCO or in COL, most of these visits take you primarily to capital cities for meetings with ministers of education and heads of institutions. They also involve you in many intergovernmental meetings.

For this reason, when you do get out into the field and see real projects benefiting real people you come home with lasting memories. I recall being taken in a small plane from Windhoek to Namibia’s border with Angola and having hundreds of schoolchildren line the long driveway to their school. They looked so neat in the school uniforms that are universal in Africa – and were very happy at the change to their routine occasioned by the visit of a white man in a suit.

I think back also on a long road trip in Rajasthan going towards the Pakistan border – the excellence of the road explained by need to get military convoys there quickly. This is a land where peacocks are plentiful wild birds and camels are used as draught animals. We were going to see a school where teenagers who had not been to primary school were taught the essentials of the primary curriculum in a three-month residential session, along with some craft skills. Some of these 14- and 15-year olds were already married and in conversation with us were unanimous in condemning the practice of arranged child marriages.

We then went to a village in the desert to which some of the girls had returned after the course. As we arrived so many garlands were placed around my neck in welcome that I could hardly raise my head. The whole village turned out for a ceremony and speeches – and we saw that the education of the girls was already having an impact. The men and the women were sitting on the ground separately but we were told that a year earlier the women would not have been allowed to be present at the ceremony at all.
When I was talking earlier about the travel requirements of these jobs I should have added that they are not for the gastronomically squeamish either. You eat what is put in front of you or risk giving offence, whether it is fried scorpions in Beijing or a mouth-numbing narcotic drink that they serve to honoured guests in Fiji in a common bowl. The guest has to empty it first.

You also get to meet some heads of state and international figures. In Beijing we were taken to meet the President of China, Zhang Jemin, in the modern Forbidden City. Along with the head of UNICEF I met President Musharraf of Pakistan in his palace in Islamabad to press the importance of education for all. When the United States rejoined UNESCO as a multilateral gesture after 9/11 they wisely sent Laura Bush, rather than George Dubya, to seal the deal. I sat next to her a lunch and found her to be a most pleasant and down-to-earth woman – as you would expect with a school librarian. At another lunch in the same dining room my neighbour was Hamid Karzai.

Those were somewhat happier times for Afghanistan. I went to Kabul in both 2002 and 2003 to check on progress in restarting the education system after the Taliban. Whenever one met a senior person – a minister or a vice-chancellor – you had to walk through an anteroom full of people waiting to ask for individual favours. I counted 24 of them on the way into the office of the Minister of Education and felt guilty about jumping the queue. He had called in a barber to give him a haircut and shave, so I had the rather surreal experience of talking about the development of education in Afghanistan through the shaving foam, razor and scissors.

But to complete my name-dropping; in terms of meeting heads of state the highlight of my UNESCO years was dinner with Fidel Castro. The occasion was a meeting of Education Ministers from across Latin America. Cuba gets cold-shouldered by the US-dominated pan-American organisations but partly makes up for it by being very active in UNESCO – and it must also be said that Cuba has a better education system than almost all other counties on the continent.

Anyway, Fidel Castro hosted about forty of us to dinner at his palace in Havana. We sat down to dinner at nine pm and Castro, who ate only a banana and nibbled at some lettuce all evening, began speaking to us. He had two interpreters, one on each side, and they relayed to and fro doing consecutive translations from Spanish into English all evening.

At about half past midnight, having been going continuously for three and a half hours, Castro paused. I thought it my duty, as the convenor of the delegation, to speak up and thank him for a most interesting evening. By this time some of the ministers were falling asleep at their places. Castro looked surprised and went on speaking for another half hour, picking arguments in a jocular way with a Brazilian minister across the table. When it turned one o’clock even Castro could see that the ministers needed to go to bed, so he said that although he didn’t usually end an evening this early he would bid us goodnight and go and watch the baseball on TV. As we filed out he gave each of us a box of cigars as a souvenir.

But that wasn’t the end of it. Our meeting was scheduled to end at lunchtime the next day and Castro was not in the schedule. However, rumours began to circulate during the morning that he was going to come and wish us goodbye. He turned up at 1pm and gave us another little speech which lasted well over an hour. He had taken a particular liking to me, perhaps because I had interrupted him at dinner, something that his own people probably didn’t dare to do. So he ended the speech with goodbyes all round and stood for several minutes with his arm around me. It is a treasured photo.
You may ask, what did he talk about for these five hours? The answer is education in Cuba. And he didn’t repeat himself as much as you might expect, given his time at the microphone. He was particularly fond of quoting figures, and these were not rounded figures. Where you or I might have said that there were some 400,000 students in the polytechnic system, for Castro it had to be accurate: 385,373. If he was at a loss for the exact figures he would ask one of the young aides who accompanied him, so they had to stay awake.

Moving to the Commonwealth of Learning

Let me say a word about my move to the Commonwealth of Learning and then conclude on a more analytical note. The Commonwealth of Learning, or COL, was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they held their biennial summit in Vancouver in 1987. The OU was involved indirectly since Lord Asa Briggs, who was then the OU’s Chancellor, had chaired a group convened by the Commonwealth Secretariat to propose measures to counter what was seen in the 1980s as the alarming drop in the numbers of Commonwealth students going abroad to study. The drop had been caused by a steep rise in tuition fees in the UK and other developed countries.

The Briggs Report, entitled Towards a Commonwealth of Learning, essentially proposed that if you couldn’t move the students you should move the courses. It proposed a ‘University of the Commonwealth for Cooperation in Distance Education’ and held out the ambition that any student, anywhere in the Commonwealth, could take distance learning courses offered by any Commonwealth institution.

At the 1987 Heads of Government meeting the Briggs Report converged with a proposal from Canada to make more use of technology in education. Led by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi the Heads responded enthusiastically to this idea and, borrowing the title of the Briggs Report, established the Commonwealth of Learning.

It was not clear exactly what it would do or how it would operate so they called for a planning committee to be set up. I was then President of Laurentian University in Ontario and I had been involved informally in preparing the Canadian proposal to the Heads of Government – as well as having attended some of the meetings in London on the issue of student mobility. I was asked to chair the planning committee.

There were two models on the table. One you might call a Commonwealth Open University; the other was an agency that would help countries to develop distance learning for themselves. The committee, on which the developed countries such as Britain were represented by their international development agencies, opted firmly for the second option and it was set up that way. Canada put in a strong bid to host the new body and so it became the first Commonwealth agency to be located outside the UK, with headquarters in Vancouver.

I should note another OU involvement and a personal irony. At the Vancouver Summit Lady Thatcher had been opposed to the creation of another intergovernmental body, but given that India was enthusiastic – and had offered $1 million in hard currency to get it going – she felt she could not veto it.

However, she did not want to put money into it. It was Sir John Caines, then the Permanent Secretary of the Overseas Development Administration, the precursor to DFID, who came up with the idea of
channelling the British contribution through the OU, which would provide an information service for the Commonwealth of Learning.

This clever idea did no harm to Sir John’s career at all and he soon moved to the Department of Education and Science as Permanent Secretary. We later became good friends and after his retirement from the civil service he joined the OU Council and became a very rigorous chairman of the Audit Committee.

However, during the meetings of the Commonwealth of Learning planning committee in 1988 I joined the other members in criticising the UK for its uncollegial behaviour in earmarking its contribution like this instead of sending a cheque to Vancouver.

The irony was that the following year, just as COL began operations, I was appointed VC of the OU and clearly had to take a different view of the desirability of sending the money to Vancouver instead of giving it to the OU to provide services. I could see that eventually the funds would go direct to COL, but I was determined that this should not happen because of any shortcomings in the OU’s provision of services. Sometime in the early nineties, after Lady Thatcher’s time, it was all resolved amicably.

All this is to say that I was quite familiar with the Commonwealth of Learning and when the job of president fell vacant in 2004 I applied for it and got it. I felt that heading COL would bring together nicely the three strands in my career, distance learning, international development and institutional leadership. I was sorry to leave UNESCO because I had enjoyed Paris, met some wonderful colleagues, and learned a tremendous amount about how the international system worked. But the prospect of heading a smaller Commonwealth organisation with a more tightly focused mandate was too tempting.

So for the last five years Vancouver has been home. By different routes my two daughters and my grandchildren also moved to Vancouver and Vancouver Island, so it really is home.

**Education for All**

Let me end, as I promised, with some more analytical and structured comments about my work at UNESCO and COL. In the end it all centres around the great project of striving for Education for All. Education for All has been a global aspiration ever since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the 1940s, but governments and international agencies got more serious about making it a reality when they convened a major intergovernmental conference on Education for All, or EFA, in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. After that the international bodies such as UNESCO and the World Bank began to make the achievement of EFA a major focus of their development work.

In the event the number of children not attending primary school actually grew, from 105 million to 125 million, in the decade following Jomtien. This was due to population growth, to the break up of the Soviet Union and to a host of other factors. So in 2000 the international community convened another large forum on EFA in Dakar, Senegal. Two of the six goals articulated in Dakar, those concerning Universal Primary Education and Gender Equality in school enrolments were carried over into the Millennium Development Goals that were included in the UN’s Millennium Declaration in late 2000.
At Dakar UNESCO was given the task of coordinating the drive to EFA, so this became my major task on arrival in Paris. It meant working closely with the World Bank, UNICEF and the national agencies for international development, such as DFID, to channel funds to countries and give them incentives to get all children into primary school at least.

We are not there yet but good progress is now being made. By 2006 there were 50 million more children in primary school than in 1999, although we project that there will still be some 40 million children not in primary school by 2015, the target date that was set. Many of them will be in Nigeria, Pakistan and other countries of Africa and south Asia, although it must be said that both India and Bangladesh are making very rapid progress.

So a lot of my work at UNESCO focused on the EFA campaign, although I also helped colleagues initiate work on the international issues created by cross-border higher education – an activity in which the OU is engaged in a big way.

You could say that at COL I have inherited the consequences of my actions at UNESCO, because a major thrust of our work at COL has to do with addressing the new problems caused by the relative success of the campaign for Universal Primary Education.

There are two. The first is what I call the secondary surge. Curiously, the development agencies were so fixated on driving the campaign for primary education that they made little preparation for its eventual success.

Here again the figures are daunting. It is estimated that there are over 400 children between the ages of 12 and 17 not attending secondary school in developing countries. These children will never be accommodated by using conventional approaches to secondary schooling – at least not in my lifetime. There are simply not the resources to build the schools necessary.

Furthermore secondary schooling in developing countries is notoriously inefficient, with unit costs three to six times those of primary schooling. In the OECD countries unit costs at secondary level are less then twice those at primary, which is more manageable.

This means that alternatives to conventional secondary schooling must be deployed, not to replace public and private conventional schools but alongside them. The challenge is so great that all contributions are welcome. As its contribution the Commonwealth of Learning is helping countries to develop open schooling. As the name implies, this is analogous to distance learning in higher education, except that since children need more support than adults the provision of that support through study centres and tutors is even more vital.

Open schooling is not new and in helping countries to develop it we can rely on what international development people call south-south cooperation. This is based on the principle that an open school operating in India has more useful lessons for the creation of an open school in Nigeria than the very different experience of rich developed countries. This is a real example. India’s National Institute of Open Schooling has 1.6 million pupils supported in over 3,000 study centres, called accredited institutions, which are run by other bodies that have a mission to support children.
It is perhaps because open schooling has developed fastest in Commonwealth countries that COL, as a Commonwealth organisation, seems to have taken the lead internationally in promoting its use, even though we are a tiny organisation of less than forty people.

Another programme of special importance is teacher education. UNESCO estimates that the world will need 10 million new teachers in the next five years to complete the drive to Universal Primary Education, to expand secondary schooling, and to cope with waves of retirement in the developed countries and deaths from AIDS in some developing countries. This too requires the use of distance learning, and we work closely with the OU on a very successful programme called TESSA: Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa.

TESSA is a consortium of 18 African universities and the OU. It develops classroom-based teacher education materials as open educational resources for use by practicing teachers and trainees across Africa. Some 500,000 teachers used them last year, so this is an example of distance learning responding to a major challenge at scale.

Conclusion

That’s probably a good place to stop. If these challenges of achieving Education for All are of further interest to you then you may like to take note of a book that I have written this year, which is now in press with Routledge. Entitled Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All, it shows how the completion of the drive for Education for All must involve distance learning. The issues of the 400 million children needing secondary schooling and the 10 million teachers who must be recruited and trained are the special foci of the book.

So that is my synopsis of the adventures of a former OU VC in international development. It continues to be a fascinating journey and I am very fortunate to have been able to continue with such absorbing work after the exhilarating eleven years at the OU. Thank you for listening. May the AOUG continue to prosper!