Opening Ceremony Address

Second Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning
("Transforming Education for Development")

Durban, South Africa
29 July 2002

by
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Mr. Chairman,
Honourable Kader Asmal, "Papa Action", Minister of Education, Republic of South Africa,
My friend and fellow workhorse Mr. Tony Mays, Chair of NADEOSA
and the Organising Committee of the Forum, and Mr. Thamsanqa Mseleku,
Director-General, Department of Education
Your Excellencies, Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth,
High Commissioners of the Commonwealth, Members of the
Diplomatic Corps and officials,
Sir John Daniel, Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO,
Respected Vice-Chancellors, former Vice-Chancellors of Commonwealth universities,
Distinguished Members of the Board of COL,
Other Distinguished Guests, Friends, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good Morning:

My colleagues and I take immense pleasure in first thanking you for that thought-provoking welcoming address and I join you with pleasure in welcoming all delegates from some 59 countries to the second Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning.

This second forum takes place at an important juncture not just for education but also for global progress, growth, peace, security and human well being. It is also appropriate that it should take place here in Africa, a continent that finally seems to be getting the respect, courtesy and consideration that it requires from the global community. The birth of the new African Union, NEPAD and the many other African-designed initiatives all reflect a desire on the part of African leadership to take a greater responsibility to shape the destiny of their nations and people to reduce - if not eliminate altogether - the levels of conflict,
poverty, destitution, disease, educational deprivation, abuse of individual freedoms and rights and at the same time paying greater heed to peace, health care, especially from some of the devastating pandemics, welfare and well-being of mothers and infants as well as good governance.

We are particularly pleased that this conference for educational innovators of the Commonwealth will bring delegates attention to these concerns through the eyes and voices of eminent international educators, as well as South Africans and advocates like Malcolm Skilbeck, John Daniel, Stephen Lewis, M.M. Pant, Munzali Jibril, Teboho Moja and Brenda Gourley, as well as the many speakers at the plenary and various parallel sessions. It is also a matter of great pride to us that our aim of attracting a large number of colleagues from this continent has also met with some success. This is delightful. This is probably the first time that I have seen such a significant African participation at a conference on open learning and I have been in this business for over 30 years.

Distance education and open learning as delivery mechanisms of education, are relatively new. But already, the range of experience is enormous; the pace of growth phenomenal. In no other grouping of nations is the growth as remarkable as it is in the Commonwealth; but then in no other group of nations do we see such a high proportion of people denied access to all levels of learning. Being home to about one-third of humanity, the Commonwealth's share of educational and training deprivation is in every sector both formal and informal. This is a shameful testimony of our collective failure. Commonwealth countries are also where the vast majority of the world's children are out of school, the largest number of untrained teachers work, the lowest participation in post-secondary education takes place and the biggest number of those functionally illiterate eke out about a dollar a day to live. These are not records we can be proud of. Yet, resources are not the only impediment here that stops us from doing better. Even with limited resources but applying the right tools to deliver the educational services can go such a long way in bringing down these levels of deprivation. The Commonwealth can benefit and needs to use more distance education if its member states are serious about those Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All targets. This requires Commonwealth nations to examine those policy and strategy issues that would enable the development and acceptance of open and distance learning as a fundamental pillar of delivering education and training to their people. In some circumstances, the same would apply to all of those bilateral and multilateral agencies that have begun to exert so much power and influence over the ways nation states plan social and educational services to their people.

In the last 13 years of its existence, the Commonwealth of Learning has been a key agent of change in the Commonwealth on matters relating to open and distance Learning. Some 59 countries are represented at this conference; of these, 41 are Commonwealth nations; the Commonwealth of Learning has had an association with each and every one of these nations in their efforts to use distance education. This is the only agency of its kind, which has consistently and diligently spoken about, and engaged in, promoting distance education over the past decade and a quarter. It is my belief that for a little while to come, we will continue to be the only multilateral agency with the required focus and perseverance to promote open learning to reduce the huge gap between demand for, and supply of, education.

Commonwealth Governments did not create COL in 1987 in response to a fad; they created it on the belief that it will respond to some serious educational challenges confronting the Commonwealth. The
foresight of our leaders in identifying distance education as a tool seems to be clearly vindicated by the developments in educational delivery over the last five years. The noise about using distance education has certainly increased. However, I am not sure that the hype has been matched by investments in distance education. Both bilateral and multilateral development agencies seem to be tinkering with the use of distance education rather than making serious efforts at including it as part of the educational advice and assistance that is proffered. One hopes this will change. Conferences like this one - and those of you here - can help to bring about the required change.

I am pleased to welcome you to this forum, to Durban, to the Republic of South Africa and the continent of Africa for a week of discussions, debates and workshops; for a week of sharing experiences and listening and a week of networking. As always, a forum like this could not have been possible but for the encouragement and assistance of so many people and organisations. I want to thank all of them on behalf of the Commonwealth of Learning, especially the Honourable Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, Republic of South Africa, and his Department of Education and the Executive Committee and membership of NADEOSA, our co-sponsors in this effort. It has been your leadership, Honourable Minister, that has helped guide us through the planning for this conference. Between them, they have made this meeting happen. I also wish to pay special tribute to the Canadian International Development Agency, the British Department for International Development and the British Council. These agencies have, for the last 13 years, shown tremendous faith, and continue to do so, in what we are striving to achieve through our work and these conferences, by providing us with the resources.

I also wish to give special thanks to all of the keynote and plenary speakers for making time for us, despite, in some cases, the awfully short notice that we were forced to give some of them. It requires a very special kind of generosity to say yes and travel thousands of miles to speak at a small and modest-sized forum. Our speakers have so much of this generous spirit - we are fortunate.

Last but not least, let me express appreciation, on behalf of all of us, to all of you, the delegates, who have come from such great distances to Durban to attend and support this second Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning.

Finally, I also wish to record a special thanks to Professor Macdonald, the Chair of the Board of COL, for his continuous and tremendous enthusiasm for all things Commonwealth, but especially COL. He has been and continues to be the quiet catalyst of all the things that we do and have done.

Colleagues, have a rewarding and enjoyable week here in this wonderful, warm, open and delightful country.

Thank you.