Introduction

It is a pleasure to be back at IIEP. I have excellent memories of my visits here as ADG, notably to assist in handing their diplomas to the stagiaires who had completed their year of study here. May I also pay tribute to your contribution to one of the most potentially important developments in education in recent years?

By its diligent work in creating and cultivating a community of interest and practice around Open Educational Resources (OERs), IIEP has played an absolutely crucial role and had an influence far beyond the small resources that you have invested in this activity. I would dare to assert that in much of the developed world IIEP is known mostly for becoming a focal point for those working on OERs.

Thank you for inviting me to address you. This is the International Institute for Educational Planning, so planning is one the themes that I would like to address. The Commonwealth of Learning, COL, has just completed the preparation of its 3-year Plan for 2006-09. We are proud of the content of the Plan and the process of its development. Both content and process may be of interest to you.

Second, I seem to be known mostly for my contribution distance learning, so I must talk about that. Distance learning - or the broader term 'technology-mediated learning' is a unifying theme of many educational developments these days, not least the Open Educational Resources to which I just referred, so it must be of interest to you too.

In recent years the number of African countries - at least Commonwealth African countries - that have put in place policies for distance learning has grown rapidly, so this is something your IIEP stagiaires ought to know about. Distance learning is also a pragmatic lead-in to the fuzzy area of ICTs in education. Going into ICTs in education through the door of distance learning makes you focus on practical issues of who does what to whom rather than getting lost in the theology of the digital divide.
So I shall try to wrap planning and distance learning up together and I’ve taken as my title Distance Learning for Development: Achievements, Trends and Plans. I shall try - with how much success you will have to judge - to weave the warp of comments on planning into the weft of remarks on distance education.

I shall start with some background on COL before explaining the thinking behind our Three-Year Plan for 2006-09, called simply Learning for Development. This Plan was endorsed by Commonwealth Ministers of Education at their Conference in Cape Town in December.

The Plan gives the overall framework of our programme for the Commonwealth as a whole. However, the key lesson that I learned by working at UNESCO for Director-General Matsuura was that what counts for individual countries is what you do for them. We translated this principle into our planning process in two ways.

First, in reporting on our work for last three years we produced a set of 49 country reports - one for each Commonwealth country except Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK. We omitted them because our mission is to the smaller and developing countries of the Commonwealth. These are available on our website if you are interested. Compiling them was a considerable task for a small organisation and it would have been an impossible task were it not for our rather sophisticated knowledge management systems, which capture every mission report and update the profiles of our work in each country.

These provided the springboard for preparing the 49 Country Action Plans that we have finalised since the Ministers' Conference in December and which make operational our overall plan for the current triennium.

What is COL?

But let me begin with the basics about COL.

The Commonwealth of Learning is a Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation created by the Heads of Government at their meeting in Vancouver in 1987. It is supported by voluntary contributions from Member States. It has its own Board of Governors with representation from around the Commonwealth, a headquarters office in Vancouver and a unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia. Our staff total 40 and the professionals are recruited Commonwealth wide and serve on rotation. COL is also supported by an extensive network of volunteer collaborators and consultants in all regions and we have a focal point in each country.

COL's purpose is to help Commonwealth governments and institutions use a variety of technologies to improve and expand education, training and learning in support of development. We have a special focus on open and distance learning, or ODL, because it has proven its cost-effectiveness in many countries. It gives you economies of scale, country-wide geographical reach, and flexibility.

A special project that we are coordinating on behalf of Ministers is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. The Ministers of Education conceived this idea at their conference in Canada in
2000 and endorsed a proposal three years later when they met in Edinburgh. 27 Small States of the Commonwealth are now engaged in making this a reality.

COL’s core budget comes from voluntary contributions from Member States. The six largest donors, with automatic seats on the Board, are Canada, India, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom. In the 2003-06 period we also had contributions from 27 other governments. Our aim is to have all countries contribute something - out of the conviction that COL gives them good value.

We also raise extrabudgetary funds in support of our programme and, in the only exception to the principle that we are not a teaching institution, by helping international organisations with their staff development. We have been doing this for some time with the WHO, UNHCR, UNAIDS, the ILO and the Red Cross and we are just starting to do it with the World Bank. The focus is on report writing and communication. With each organisation we work hard to ensure that the course addresses directly the report writing style and culture of that organisation. They are all different, even within the UN family. So far we haven't had a nibble from UNESCO about these eLearning courses, of whose eLearning format we are very proud, so we can only assume that communication and report writing in this organisation is of exemplary lucidity.

**Learning for Development: 3-Year Plan 2006-09**

Let me now outline our new three-year plan. It is called simply *Learning for Development*, because that is our business. Achieving the development goals, not just in education but also in health and hunger, is basically a matter of mass learning. Conventional methods cannot cope with the scale of the learning challenge. COL helps countries use technology to increase the scope and scale of learning. That in a nutshell is the rationale for our work.

As Amartya Sen argues, development is freedom and learning is the primary means of achieving it in all fields. Freedom is both the primary purpose of development and the principal means of achieving it. That is because free people do more to develop their families, their communities and their nations than people who are not free.

*Looking Back*

The problem is that traditional and current teaching and learning systems can't meet the challenge. Our Plan begins with a section called Looking Back, an excellent idea proposed by DfID. It tries to answer two questions.

First, were Commonwealth Heads of Government right, twenty years ago, to intuit that educational technology was important and create COL? Has educational technology and distance learning made a difference? And, second, if it has made a difference, has COL contributed to its impact?

The section on Looking Back reports on the tremendous impact of distance learning in four key areas: higher education; teacher training; alternative or open schooling; and fighting poverty. A good example of this growth is the multiplication of open universities in the Commonwealth. From ten in 1988 the figure has grown to 23 and today they enrol some 4 million students between them.
The picture in the three other areas is equally persuasive. Teacher education at a distance is now a vibrant activity. The numbers being trained are impressive: hundreds of thousands in Africa and over one million in India. COL has contributed substantially to this trend by helping to increase capacity for distance learning in countries as diverse as The Gambia, India, Lesotho, Nigeria and Sri Lanka. Recently it worked with Zambia to formulate a strategy for using open and distance learning (ODL) and ICTs in both pre- and in-service teacher development. Teacher education administrators from all countries of the Commonwealth have received support through an annual COL-sponsored workshop series in Singapore. Some of COL’s most recent work has focused on raising standards by developing Commonwealth quality assurance guidelines with partners in Asia and Africa.

As countries strive towards achieving universal primary education, many more youngsters are finishing primary school. Sadly, most of them have little chance of getting into secondary school. There are simply not enough secondary schools or the trained teachers to staff them. Ministries of education are therefore turning to alternative means of secondary schooling. Open schooling uses high-quality self-instructional materials coupled with networks of local centres staffed with capable facilitators trained to support the learners.

Recent successes in Asia and Africa show that open schooling is a feasible alternative to classroom education. It increases access to schooling in a timely, efficient and cost-effective manner and is especially good for reaching girls, women and other disadvantaged groups that have difficulty accessing conventional schooling on a full-time basis.

For example, there are now some 1.5 million children enrolled in the open schooling system in school-level and technical/vocational training courses in India alone. COL has worked with India's National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS) to update its production processes for quality learning materials and to extend awareness of the potential of open schooling in India. As a result, NIOS is now working with state governments to establish 14 state open schools across India.

Finally, the basic development agenda of improving health and reducing poverty and hunger calls for learning on a massive scale, with the focus on improving livelihoods and fostering a healthy population. While the content of learning in these areas is necessarily very locality specific, economies of scale have been achieved by sharing similar models for technology use and learner support.

Improving livelihoods in rural areas is central to world poverty reduction. These livelihoods are mostly farming-dependent, and agricultural extension is still largely based on face-to-face communication and demonstration. However, since the Green Revolution of the 1960s, communications technology has also been applied to agricultural extension.

Radio remains the most important medium for communicating with the rural populations of developing countries. This is particularly true in Africa where there were already 65 million radio receivers a decade ago. More recently video has become an important medium for agricultural education, the basic principle being to empower agricultural extension officers by teaching them camera and video production skills for use at the local level. This supports government policies of crop diversification among small-plot farmers in response to changing patterns of trade.

New tools for poverty reduction are also now available. ICT kiosks are spreading into the villages of
India, although evaluation of the early experiences showed that they had been introduced without the adequate involvement of local people. To correct this omission, COL developed its Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3 Farmers) programme. I'll come back to that in a minute. Meanwhile those are just four examples of the growing role of distance learning - broadly defined - in development.

Looking Forward

COL’s Plan then looks to the future, reflecting the intensive consultations we carried out in preparing it. What were the key messages?

This is a young world and creating sustainable livelihoods for billions of young people is the key development challenge. It is a diverse world and a diverse Commonwealth. However, contemporary technology can help us to complete the unfinished development agenda. The feedback from the Commonwealth also underlined the development disaster that is HIV/AIDS, the importance of learning for women and the imperative of bridging the digital divide.

We also commissioned a formal external evaluation of our work in 2003-06. It told us that we should offer fewer programmes and continue them for longer; we must match government priorities with a programme focus, not a project focus; we must strengthen teamwork whilst taking full advantage of the tremendous skills and experience of our individual staff members; and we must always work in partnership. Our plan tries to do all those things.

What is Development?

We think of development as the combination of the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All and the Commonwealth values of peace, democracy, equality and good governance. This led us to divide our activities into three sectors: Education; Learning for Livelihoods; and Human Environment. In our activities and initiatives we aim for one or more of four outcomes.

First, the longer COL exists, the more we observe that successful use of technology for learning depends on laying down a foundation of policy. Second, much of COL's work is capacity building to help systems that involve technology-mediated learning to work better. Third, we try to analyse our areas of work in terms of models. This helps us understand why something works and the ingredients of its success. It also helps in transferring the programme to a different country. Finally, although we do not develop materials ourselves, we help institutions to produce them. COL then tries to get them used across the Commonwealth. Those are the outputs and outcomes we aim for in each of our initiatives.

In the Plan, copies of which I will leave with you, these outputs, outcomes and impacts have been boiled down into performance indicators, the whole making a Corporate Logic Model on the pull-out centrefold that we think is a modèle du genre. No pun intended.

To keep it simple we have five initiatives in each of the three programme sectors. In Education we offer help in Quality Assurance; Teacher Development; Open or Alternative Schooling; Higher Education; and eLearning for Education Sector development. These are the areas to which governments attached most importance in our consultations with them.
I have already mentioned the brisk growth in the use of ODL for teacher development and open schooling for secondary education and we can come back to that in discussion. But let me focus now on COL's two other sectors.

In the sector of Learning for Livelihoods we also have five initiatives.

First, there is Learning and Skills for Livelihoods, where the aim is to find ways of translating learning as directly as possible into improved livelihoods. Second, there is our Rural and Peri-Urban Community Development Initiative, which is our successful programme for improving the prosperity of farmers. Third, National and International Community Development refers particularly to working with the international organisations in the agriculture sector to extend our poverty reduction programme. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is housed in this sector so let me give you a quick update on that.

**Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth**

So far we have secured funds for the development of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth from two sources, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation of the USA and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation. The CFTC has allocated £1 million over four years as part of its policy of supporting human resource development in the Commonwealth.

A major use of these funds has been to hold planning, organisational and course development meetings as shown on this schedule. Although much of the work of course development will take place online and at a distance, we believed that to get the project going, people needed to meet.

One thing we had to get right is the subjects on which courses and programmes will focus. This list was the result of correspondence with small states' governments back in 2004 and the planning meetings in Singapore in 2005 and 2006. As you can see the VUSSC is focussing on skills and livelihood-related courses.

A very important milestone in the development of the Virtual University was the first course development meeting held in Mauritius in August last year. It was quickly nicknamed the 'Boot Camp' because for many participants it was a basic training in working and collaborating online.

Participants were introduced to the ICT components of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, open source software, Wikis, and ePortfolios. All this material is being prepared as open content with a Creative Commons - BY - SA licence. We are grateful for the inspiration of IIEP's work on OERs which has done so much to develop a producer and user community around this revolutionary concept.

The participants in the Boot Camp created content on Tourism and Hospitality and on Small Business Management - three times as much material as we expected in the time available. This course development work is continuing as participants contribute online from their offices at home. Participants picked up skills fast and are now providing buddy-training to their colleagues back in their countries. This illustrates what a useful tool the VUSSC will be in bridging the digital divide in these small states.
COL got involved with the VUSSC after the 14th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Canada when Ministers asked COL to work up a proposal with them. Since then we have coordinated the initiative; we have put all our considerable expertise in educational technology at the disposal of the participants; we have assisted in building local capacity; and we have obtained funds for the programme.

But you should understand what COL is not. COL is not a degree-awarding body. COL is not the Virtual University. Awards made as a result of VUSSC study will be made by institutions in the countries and we are working with them and the South African Qualifications Authority to facilitate arrangements for credit transfer and recognition of qualifications.

This is not COL's project, it is the Ministers' project. Ministries of Education have a crucial role in developing policy to fit national priorities; in liaising with other ministries where courses are of interest to them; in allocating people; and generally in supporting and monitoring the implementation of the programme. The beneficial impact of the VUSSC will depend very directly on the extent to which Ministers get their people engaged and have them take responsibility for it. The VUSSC must develop in close collaboration with local institutions, which will have the responsibility for linking into the international teams developing the courses and then adapting and delivering them in appropriate ways in each country.

COL’s Models

Finally, to return to the Plan, the final initiative in Learning and Livelihoods is Transnational Programmes. These are courses and materials whose use we facilitate around the Commonwealth. The best example is the Commonwealth Executive MBA and MPA programmes, developed in South Asia but now being adopted in Africa, the Caribbean and the South Pacific.

The final sector, which we shall develop further in the coming years, is Human Environment. The five initiatives are Gender and Development; Health, Welfare and Community Development; Environmental Education; Good Governance and the Educational Use of Mass Media and ICTs.

All this is done with a budget that it so tiny I am almost embarrassed to mention it. However, governments seem convinced that they get great value from it. Our fundamental strength is that Ministers like us and trust us. From their point of view COL's assets are that we work for them, we have first rate expertise in educational technology, we stress south-south cooperation, we focus on locally driven development and we have some proven models of development that work.

In conclusion I would like to mention two of those models. I will give examples of one initiative from each of the last two sectors that I have mentioned.

I start with Learning for Livelihoods and our initiative on Rural and Peri-Urban Community Development. We are extremely proud of the success of our Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme - L3 Farmers. This takes dead aim at the Poverty MDG. It began in India and is now being transferred to Sri Lanka and Africa.

The model, like most of our models, is simple but effective. We start at the grassroots and get the farmers to define their vision of a better future and the questions that it raises. We then get the information
providers to work together to answer those questions, using commercial ICT kiosks as an information channel. We get banks and businesses involved by holding out the prospect of a more prosperous village.

In one village in Tamil Nadu, for example, the farmers decided that better dairying was the way to a more prosperous future. Their first question was how to tell a good milk cow from a poor one. The information providers came up with a checklist which some of the village women, who had learned some web programming skills, put into an instructional sequence on the ICT kiosk.

This generated other learning needs, such as testing the quality of the milk, because the bank got a dairy company in the local town to guarantee regular purchases of good quality milk. The banks then started loaning money.

Two years on the results are good. Loans of $200,000 dollars have been made with a repayment rate of more than 100% because some are repaid early. Hundreds more loans are in preparation. The farmers, 60% of whom are women, are more prosperous and more empowered and, best of all, the model is spreading spontaneously from village to village without COL's involvement. We shall launch it in Sri Lanka very soon and discussions are going on in several African countries.

Moving to Human Environment I shall say a word about our work in Health, Welfare and Community Development. Let me describe another simple model that we call Media Empowerment, which is a contribution to tackling the three Health MDGs. It began in Africa but is now being adopted in Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean.

The model is to equip effective local NGOs, usually identified for us by the World Health Organisation, with a complete set of video recording and editing equipment, which costs less than $20,000, and to train them intensively in its use. They then shoot and edit videos on health matters, usually HIV, or AIDS stigma, or malaria, or soon diabetes. These videos communicate very effectively because they are made by the people for the people.

To reach the audience the NGO uses what we call village cinema: they go to village at night, hang up a sheet between two trees, and project the video using a projector powered by a generator on the back of a pick-up truck.

In The Gambia they estimate some 60% of the total population have seen these videos and the Government says they have arrested the increase in HIV transmission and have increased substantially the numbers using insecticide treated bed nets. It's effective and inexpensive. COL refreshes the equipment from time to time but otherwise this is development without donors. I shall leave a handout which gives contact details for our colleague David Walker, seen here at a school in The Gambia, who has done a brilliant job implementing this model in a dozen Commonwealth countries in all regions.

I hope that gives you a little of the flavour of what COL means by Learning for Development and how we have planned to be even more effective at promoting learning for development in the years ahead.

I thank you for your attention and, once again, comment IIEP for its splendid work in training educational planners and, most particularly, in helping to give wings to the revolutionary notion of open educational resources.