

Commonwealth and Caribbean Cooperation in Distance Education: Challenges and Opportunities



Commonwealth and Caribbean Cooperation in Distance Education: Challenges and Opportunities, Public Lecture presented at the: Jamaica Association for Distance and Open Learning (JADOL), Jamaica, 17 February 2005

*By: Sir John Daniel, President & CEO
Commonwealth of Learning*

Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be here in Jamaica and in the Caribbean. In my first year as President of the Commonwealth of Learning I am trying to visit each of the six major regions of the Commonwealth: Central and West Africa; East and Southern Africa; the Pacific; South Asia; Europe/North America; and the Caribbean.

Three weeks ago I was in West Africa, in Ghana. After I had met President Kufuor, my hosts took me to the Castle at Cape Coast which was a main centre of the British slave trade. During my time at UNESCO I had visited the Île de Gorée, in Senegal, which was the shipping point for the French slave traders. However, Cape Coast Castle is an altogether bigger affair. They told me that somewhere between twelve and twenty million people were taken out from there, through what they called The Door of No Return, to the waiting ships.

Some of those people were the ancestors of many the wonderful people that I have met in this ten-day trip to the Caribbean. Seeing both ends of the slave route in the space of two weeks has brought home to me the enormity of this blot on human history and the horror of this shameful example of man's inhumanity to man. Today I am here to celebrate and develop the positive links between Commonwealth countries, but we must not forget the terrible triangular trade that linked Britain, West Africa and the Caribbean for more than a century.

Practically all Commonwealth countries have been shaped by the migration of people. For some the migration was forced, as in the slave trade and the shipping of prisoners to Australia; for others it was

semi-voluntary: the many indentured labourers from South Asia and East Asia whose descendants are everywhere in today's Commonwealth; for yet others it was entirely voluntary: the millions of people who, like me, have followed their careers from one Commonwealth country to another.

The Jamaican-born scholar, Professor Stuart Hall, who was my colleague for a decade at the UK Open University, has pointed out that culture is more about routes, spelt R-O-U-T-E-S, than about roots, spelt R-O-O-T-S. The trajectories that we and our families follow define us more than the origins of our distant ancestors. I am impressed by the extent of the contemporary movement of people between the countries of the Caribbean, not least in the education sector, and the new routes that people are creating between themselves.

Talking of the movement of people to and within the Caribbean, I am delighted that my first trip to Jamaica as President of the Commonwealth of Learning gives me the chance to make a happy announcement.

Every two years COL holds a Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. The first was held in Brunei, the second in Durban, South Africa and the third in Dunedin, New Zealand, last year. At the Dunedin conference we invited bids to host the 4th Pan-Commonwealth Forum and received four offers, including one from the Caribbean coordinated by Professor Stewart Marshall of UWI.

I am delighted to announce that after a rigorous selection process the choice has fallen on the Caribbean and on Jamaica. Late next year practitioners of distance and open learning from all over the Commonwealth will come to Jamaica to share experiences and initiate further cooperative ventures. I am absolutely delighted by this decision and I am sure that hosting the whole Commonwealth will be a most exciting opportunity for JADOL and its members and for the membership of the recently created Caribbean Association for Distance and Open Learning, CARADOL. I congratulate all those involved.

May I also take this opportunity to thank Senator Burchell Whiteman, who represents the Caribbean on the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth of Learning, for his wise counsels - and also for being a member of the selection panel that appointed me to this job?

Today I have chosen as my title Commonwealth and Caribbean Cooperation in Distance Education: Challenges and Opportunities.

I shall begin by emphasising that all Commonwealth cooperation, whether in distance education or in other fields, has a special focus on small states. Small states account for two-thirds of the 53 countries of the Commonwealth. Furthermore the small island states of the Commonwealth account for three-quarters of all the world's small island states. This means that small states are integral to the notion of the Commonwealth and therefore that the work of the Commonwealth should be of special importance for small states.

After making some comments about the special situation of small states I shall outline what the Commonwealth of Learning, COL, is doing to help small states. We are always eager to increase the

relevance and impact of that work. I shall talk later about the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth which the Ministers of Education have asked us to create.

However, I do not want to leave the impression that COL's agenda is mostly about higher education. COL has already made a useful contribution to higher education in the Caribbean in various ways, and that will continue. I am particularly impressed with our collaboration with UTech on the Special Diploma for Teachers of Technical and Vocational Education and would like us to use the new opportunities now available to embed that across the Caribbean.

COL must also be sensitive to new needs. Throughout the world governments have committed themselves, since 2000, to using the Millennium Development Goals as the framework for their action. That action, of course, varies from country to country, depending on how far the different goals have been attained in a particular jurisdiction. COL now organises much of its work within the general framework of the MDGs whilst orienting its particular actions in line with the priorities of each country.

The timing of my visit is also important because COL is already developing its plan of work for the 2006-09 triennium, which we shall present to the Commonwealth Ministers of Education at their conference next year. To underpin the plan we have commissioned environmental scans in the different regions of the world. Dennis Irvine and Nancy George are leading the scan for this region. We are also holding regional consultations, like the events that we held here in Jamaica last November and in Trinidad last week. These consultations, which have already involved hundreds of people around the world, are an important reality check to ensure that COL acts in response to your needs.

Hence, after my more general comments about all small states I shall talk briefly about collaboration on distance education within the Caribbean. A ten-day tour of only four countries does not make me an expert. However, sometimes an observer sees the trends in the game better than the players. My COL colleagues have long experience of working in this region and I hope that you will take my constructive comments in the spirit in which they are made.

The Special Needs of Small States

Let me focus for a moment on the general needs of small states. It would be superfluous for me to talk at any length about life in small countries, whether they are landlocked states like Swaziland and Lesotho; coastal states like Belize and Guyana; The Gambia, which is a mixture of both; or small islands like most of the Caribbean Commonwealth. Most of you come from small states so you know more about the opportunities and the challenges that they face than I do. Looked at in a world perspective and from the perspective of the Millennium Development Goals, small states face some special challenges.

The most obvious is simply being small. A small territory means that natural resources are limited in quantity and variety. A small population makes it difficult for a country to have skilled and qualified people in all the many occupations and trades that underpin a complex modern economy.

Then there is the tyranny of transport. Small landlocked states face difficulty and expense in getting their

traded goods to and from ports in neighbouring countries. Island states face the challenges of distance from markets and the cost of sea and air links.

Lately we have become more aware of the special environmental challenges that face small states. Even more recently the occurrence of natural disasters such as hurricane Ivan in Grenada and here, the tsunami in the Maldives and the floods in Guyana has reminded the world that small states are both particularly prone to natural calamities and especially vulnerable to their effects. A huge country like India has the resources and people to help the very small proportion of its population that suffered from the tsunami along its south-eastern coast. In the Maldives, on the other hand, although the number of casualties was much smaller than in India, the effect on the society and the economy is much greater.

COL is helping small states in a number of ways. At the most general level we try to make it easier for these states to work together on educational matters. Thus we have supported meetings of the Chief Education Officers of the Caribbean, because we believe that it is helpful for these senior officials to compare notes on a regional basis.

Last year a Caribbean CEOs meeting was held in Dunedin, New Zealand at COL's Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. A memorable moment at that event was a gathering of the Caribbean CEOs with their equivalents from the Pacific Islands, where the two groups discovered and discussed numerous challenges they have in common. The Caribbean CEOs met again in Trinidad last week and the chairmanship of the group passed from Guyana to Dominica.

A recent example of COL's role in the Caribbean is our work with the Caribbean Examinations Council, the CXC, to train and equip the staff to develop learning materials for subjects in the CSEC and CAPE curricula. From COL's point of view this is a nice example of a sustainable innovation that clearly improves the education system. The CXC now has the capacity to continue producing materials on more subjects and has built this into its budgets. The materials themselves help teachers by giving them clear points of reference for the curricula and they help students, particularly adult students, by making it possible for them to do much more study on their own.

That is an example of COL's work in helping an institution to develop an application of open and distance learning. The other areas in which we help governments and organisations are in the formulation of policy on technology-mediated education and in the creation and improvement of technology-based education and training systems. The longer COL exists, the more convinced we have become that starting with close attention to policy and strategy is the best way to ensure that the introduction of technology in any area of education or training is successful and sustainable.

COL's overall aim is to help countries in their development by making it easier for people to learn. When you think about it, the attainment of any one of the Millennium Development Goals will require a massive increase in human learning.

I am not just talking about those goals that refer specifically to education, like the goal of attaining Universal Primary Education by 2015, but all the goals. We shall never attain the goals for reducing

hunger and poverty unless millions of farmers and smallholders learn new ways of growing crops and ways of growing new crops. I met the Minister of Agriculture yesterday to see how COL could build on its work to facilitate the wrenching transitions that farming is experiencing here.

In various parts of the world COL is working with farmers to bring them knowledge that could improve their livelihoods. Agriculture in the Caribbean is facing a crisis as terms of trade change. Agricultural extension units, working in traditional ways, struggle to serve the multiple needs of the region's many small farmers. Through COL's media empowerment programme we provide extension units and NGO's with the equipment and training necessary to enhance the scope, scale and impact of their information messages in a way that generates productive dialogue amongst the farmers themselves.

I had the privilege of meeting Jamaica's Minister of Agriculture, the Honourable Roger Clarke, yesterday and it is clear that the COL equipment and training is having a very positive impact on the modernisation of this country's agriculture.

Similarly, the achievement of the health goals, whether in the reduction of disease, of infant mortality or maternal mortality, needs not just improved health services but also requires that millions of people to learn how to live more healthily. Not surprisingly, people take advice about health more seriously if it comes from within their own culture. COL's special role is to empower NGOs and community groups to use media for this purpose.

All of COL's work is based on the principle that traditional methods of teaching and learning cannot cope with the scale of the task that the world faces in education and training. In most other areas of life technology has transformed the way we do things, mostly for the better. COL's aim is to harness technology to increase the scope and scale of learning.

Cooperation in the Caribbean

To mention another example of COL's work, which leads me to talk about cooperation within the Caribbean, COL is helping governments to get to grips with the changing scene of higher education. Open and distance learning has a long history in the Caribbean but ODL is changing, notably with the development of eLearning, and higher education is changing, notably with the growth of private providers and the expansion of cross border provision, both distance learning and the creation of offshore campuses.

Most governments are trying to make sense of all this so that they can take advantage of the trends to increase access to higher education for their citizens whilst protecting the student, as consumer, from fraudulent operators and low quality provision.

A key question is whether the states of the Caribbean act individually to regulate and accredit higher education, or whether they cooperate on a regional basis. In a year when most of the states of the Anglophone are joining together in the Caribbean Single Market and Economy it seems more than desirable to create a Caribbean Higher Education Space analogous to the European Higher Education

Space. This is particularly important because university graduates will be the first group eligible for Pan-Caribbean mobility under the CSME.

Furthermore, two regional initiatives of great interest to the Commonwealth of Learning, namely the Caribbean Knowledge and Learning Network, CKLN, and CUPIDE offer this region a splendid opportunity. These programmes aim to provide high-bandwidth connectivity in support of distance education in Caribbean universities. They will function much better if individual states agree to a regional approach, not least to the issues of telecommunications regulation and licensing that could be showstoppers if they are not handled sensibly.

Of course, collaboration at the regional level is difficult. I understand, for example, that each country has made its own offers on education under the General Agreement on Trade in Services without consulting the others. On the other hand I am delighted that a Caribbean wide accreditation and quality assurance framework has emerged under CARICOM. I hope that its implementation does not founder on the expensive requirement that each country has to set up its own accreditation service.

As the political will to act regionally in these matters does emerge, COL can help with the development of policies and structures. We have been closely involved in the exercise of developing guidelines for cross border education that is being completed by the OECD and UNESCO.

At COL we have a habit of thinking of the University of the West Indies and the University of the South Pacific as similar institutions, which they are. In most of the world one country supports a number of universities. In these two cases, a number of countries support one university. However, it seems that the two universities, USP and UWI, are evolving in different ways.

USP is reinforcing its coherence as a university, notably through the creation of a single student record system that serves the whole university and all students, whether on-campus, at a distance, or studying through a blend of the two. It was, of course, the growth of blended learning and the breaking down of the full-time/part-time and on-campus/off-campus distinctions that led USP to develop a unified record system.

It is curious that UWI is evolving in the opposite direction, creating distinct and not very compatible student record systems on each campus, as well as different programmes in the same subject on each campus. I hasten to say that it is in the nature of network universities to fly apart under centrifugal forces.

Various universities in the UK and Canada began as campuses of London University and McGill University respectively and then became independent as their region gained maturity. In a multi-country university it is natural that a country that hosts a campus pushes it to become a national university, downplaying regional considerations. Some countries are setting up national universities, like this one, alongside UWI.

This may be a natural progression but, as we see in the case of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy, there are also good reasons in today's world for thinking regionally. Distance education is a

rather obvious example and I have mentioned two exciting projects, the CKLN and CUPIDE, that have attracted funding from outside the region on the assumption that the regional whole can be greater than the sum of the national parts. I am delighted to see UTech engaging with this process in a determined manner.

This issue of the communications infrastructure for distance learning is of direct interest to COL because the Commonwealth Ministers of Education from small states have asked COL to help them create what they have called the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

This idea emerged at the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers held in Halifax, Canada in 2000. At that time, you will recall, the dotcom frenzy was at its height and the talk was of an unstoppable revolution in education that would sweep away all previous educational methods. The ministers from small states, concerned that their countries did not have the critical mass of expertise and technology to operate confidently in this new world, asked COL to work with them on a proposal for a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

The key idea was that by acting collectively these states could be players in the world of eLearning, and would not need to depend solely on offerings from bigger countries. The ministers revisited the idea when they met in Edinburgh in 2003 and asked COL to proceed. In doing so we are operating on three principles.

First, we are building this Virtual University from the bottom up. Instead of offering a ready-made institution with a programme of courses we have asked governments and institutions to tell us what their priorities are for such a vehicle. As particular areas emerge as priorities for several countries COL will put together coalitions of the willing to develop the necessary courses and systems.

Second, following from the decision to be guided by country priorities, we do not have any preconceived notions about the level and content of provision. The ministers called it a 'university' but we imagine that provision will cover a range of areas, probably with the main focus on various technical and vocational topics related to livelihoods.

Third, although the ministers used the word 'virtual', we interpret that in its widest sense to mean any appropriate use of technology, be it print, radio, video or eLearning. All the experience of the last thirty years teaches us that what counts is not the particular medium used but the quality of thinking that goes into curriculum development, pedagogical design and student support.

However, we expect that many countries will see this as an opportunity to increase their capacity to exploit the Internet and develop eLearning. COL is well equipped to respond help those who want to move in this direction because we are at the centre of the various developments that are coming together to facilitate eLearning.

I refer first to Learning Management Systems, which are the software platforms on which eLearning courses run. COL's aim here is to help countries and institutions make good choices that do not lead to

nasty surprises of large additional costs just as the project is getting operational. In this respect a presentation about CKLN that I heard last week from Ken Sylvester in Port of Spain was music to my ears, because CKLN is clearly going to be a force for getting the region to converge on an open source Learning Management System.

Second, I refer to learning objects and the repositories in which they are stored. One of the great advantages of eLearning is that it is cheap and easy to share learning materials, which we call learning objects. This also makes it much easier for people in different countries to work together on developing learning objects, which is one of the aims of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

In both these areas, Learning Management Systems and Learning Objects, COL will promote and facilitate the use of Free and Open Source Software, or FOSS for short. The extension of the concept of open source software to the arena of learning objects is one of the most hopeful developments in education in years, because it will make the sharing, adaptation and re-use of learning materials so much easier. Here is a product of globalisation and technology that could be of great benefit to developing countries and a break with the sad tradition that new technology often results in a transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich.