

Open and Flexible Learning: Commonwealth Experience and India's Challenge



*Open and Flexible Learning: Commonwealth Experience and India's Challenge, Inaugural Remarks
Sub-theme: Flexible and Open Learning, Main theme:
Technology Enabled Flexible Education and
Development*

*at the: 76th Annual Meeting of the Association of
Indian Universities Central University of Chandigarh,
Chandigarh, India, 5 - 8 December 2001*

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Transcript

Salutations!

1. Colleagues, it is both a pleasure and a privilege to share some thoughts with you at your 76th annual gathering on the sub-theme: Flexible and Open Learning. I could never have imagined some 42 years ago, that I would have this rare honour of addressing a meeting of academic leaders in this great country. It was then that I first came to India from Malaysia as an 18 year old to enter college in Tamil Nadu. Spurred by a sense of nationalism and economics, my father decided that his first-born should receive a college education in his motherland; and so I did! I am not sure how it is today, but in the late 50s "freshies" never met Vice Chancellors. Vice Chancellors then occupied another planet (some would say that they still do); so, you can appreciate my sense of delight and awe being here; my father will be proud of me! Having said that, I am also reminded of a speech made by that great Indian Mohandas K. Gandhi in early 1942 at the Benares Hindu University. On that occasion, looking at his audience of learned individuals he was heard to have said that "A feeling of nervousness overpowered me when I am in the midst of learned men . . . In your midst, I feel tongue tied." He went on to further add, after looking at the topic given to him, that "The inspiration has come, but I do not know how you will welcome my plain

speaking". I too am tongue-tied and I am inspired, as Indian Vice Chancellors continue to be a formidable specie. They are tough, brave, politically well connected, have tremendous responsibility, have a huge self esteem and some would claim to be almost infallible. And, they have a difficult job.

2. Respected Vice Chancellors, your outgoing President wanted me to share a few thoughts on Flexible and Open Learning with you. I suspect he did so out of kindness and perhaps was prompted more by the position I currently occupy as the head of the Commonwealth of Learning than, say, any expertise on the subject on my part. Your weekly news magazine regularly carries articles on the subject and I am not sure that I can add a lot more value to what you already know, other than perhaps describe a perspective from the viewpoint of the Commonwealth. The method of delivering post-secondary learning through open and flexible means is of great interest to the Commonwealth of Learning. We are mandated by Commonwealth Governments to be advocates and promoters of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning. However, these are not synonymous terms nor are the practices dependent on each other. But as educational practices, they are part of a phenomena that has been evolving over the last 40 or 50 years as educators explored imaginative ways to take education to those, who for whatever reason, could not go to a campus and a classroom. A colleague of mine saw the relationship in terms of an evolution as the learning environment continued to change during the last half of the century. The first phase is Distance Education, which emerged as a response to the needs of learners who were unable to access campus-based institutions because of geographical distance and/or work and personal commitments. The second phase is Open Learning, which while also responding to challenges of distance did so in the context of learners who were disadvantaged in terms of university entry behaviour and were seeking a second chance. The third phase is Flexible Learning, which had less to do with distance or disadvantage than about providing "more" education to "more" students anywhere, anytime at "less" cost. In this phase, CD-ROMs and the Internet have become tools as solutions to on- and off-campus students. Rather than spend the next 20 minutes on defining these terms, I will take some liberty in the way I apply these terms by mixing and matching them, believing that all these practices serve the single purpose of enhancing access to learning.

3. Many among you, as well as your peers across the Commonwealth, continue to remind their communities as well as their nations on the shrinking of the half-life of knowledge. Part of the exhortation is about the need for knowledge refreshing and renewal especially amongst our professional class. I am typical of these type of professional individuals of my generation. Between that brief and carefree period of my college days in Tambaram, Chennai and today, my life has changed in many ways, not the least of which is the need for me to go back to study over and over again both formally and non-formally as I moved from job to job and country to country. I could not have done this but for opportunities along the way to continue studying, while maintaining a job and bringing up a family all at the same time. So I am "inspired to speak" on Flexible and Open Learning as a beneficiary of such opportunities. Not only that, but also along the way as I was transforming from being a trained and practicing biologist to an untrained and practicing educational administrator, I had to, as part of my personal toolkit, pick up skills in typewriting, word processing, Internet and Web browsing, people management, public relations, amateur politics and educational economics. Since many of you may have also gone through similar life experiences as I did, I therefore do fear "how you would welcome" what I have to say. Am I bringing

coals to Newcastle? Even after some 60 years since the Father of the Nation made his remark, Indian Vice Chancellors continue to be a powerful force with a capacity to not only make speakers such as myself nervous by their wealth of knowledge but also inadequate by a lack of understanding of the Indian context and challenges.

4. Yet, all that I have read and heard in recent times indicate that the delivery of education and training by Indian Universities must change for a variety of reasons. I heard this call being made recently by one of your academics in the Times Higher Education Supplement. Dr. Prasenjit Malti of West Bengal put it this way: "The problems of India's higher education sector seems to defy solutions. The system remains entrenched in an outdated tradition established by the colonial rulers in the 19th and early part of the past century for a specific purpose suited to them. Conditions are deteriorating as a result of expansion and are even made worse by shrinking resources. Declining quality, inadequate facilities, and a mismatch between education and skills requirements have become crucial themes . . . Dr. Malti is not the first to make this comment; others have also spoken, over the years, of issues that have held back the development of the tertiary education sector in this country. An oppressive bureaucracy, inadequate funding, politicisation of academe and its leadership, quality of the learning environment, relevance of curriculum, inadequacy of access, have all been identified as impediments at one time or another. In the context of my presentation this morning, perhaps the last, i.e. access to learning by very few or perhaps the lack of access to the many is pertinent. There are many who would say that most universities in India have enough challenges already by just having to deal with the conventional way of delivering education. Increasing access through the introduction of flexible and open learning, however desirable it may be, will only debilitate university administration further, apart from causing further financial stress on already hard pressed vice chancellors.

5. UNESCO, in the autumn of 1998, presented a proposal at the World Conference on Higher Education, which was subsequently adopted as a vision for higher education in the 21st century. In it, UNESCO urged its member states to "establish, where appropriate the legislative political and financial framework for the reform and further development of higher education, in keeping with the terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which establishes that . . . no one can be excluded from higher education or its study fields . . . on grounds of race, gender, language, religion, or age or because of any economic or social distinctions or physical disabilities". The same document went even further to urge institutions of member states to ". . . include life long learning approaches, giving learners an optimal range of choice and a flexibility of entry and exit points within the system, and redefine their role accordingly, which implies the development of open and continuous access to higher learning . . ." There is at least one country that I know of which has taken this position as its mantra. In the Republic of Ireland, the Chair of the Higher Education Authority declared in 1999 that "Policies for equality are amongst the most important policies of a university. Education is one of the most effective instruments available for addressing inequality and . . . Higher education has a key role". In demanding this, he was also resonating that country's Equal Status Act which makes it the responsibility of an educational establishment "not to discriminate in relation to neither the admission or the terms or conditions of admission of a person as a student to the establishment, nor the access of a student to any course, facility or benefit provided by the establishment." Here in India, it seems to me that there are many good and compelling reasons to consider

UNESCO's appeal on a number of areas in its proposal. Of these, at least five stand out to me as particularly pertinent. They are:

(i) Participation rates: With about 200 universities and 8,000 colleges catering for some 5 million learners, the expansion of higher education in India is truly phenomenal. Despite the rapid increase of provision for post-secondary education, participation rates in this country are still abysmally inadequate by any standards. That participation continues to hover around 600 per 100,000 head of population compared to (say) Brazil which is around 1100, Egypt around 1700, Japan at around 3100, the UK at around 3200, Canada around 6300. What these figures indicate in the context of open and flexible learning is the huge reservoir of previously unmet demand that is out there for post-secondary education for a very long time. As India continues to move towards a knowledge-based economy and society, it will, like others in similar circumstances, find citizens continuously demanding more learning while in the workforce. Many without a tertiary qualification will find open and flexible-learning opportunities as more suitable and their only means to acquire such an education.

(ii) Access and Equity: There continues to be a tremendous imbalance in access and equity. There is the shame of continuous gender imbalance but equally disturbing is that some 70% of the population, which lives in rural India, have difficulty getting to a university because of geography and poverty. Higher education in the country is clearly an urban phenomenon. Bringing rural inhabitant and women into education must be seen as an important social consideration. This must particularly apply to those who are denied access to learning for economic, cultural, religious or other reasons. If these folks cannot come to school then school must find a way to go reach them wherever they are.

(iii) Barriers governed by age, prior learning, social status and geography. University education in India is surprisingly not supply-driven and therefore elitist by definition. This situation has allowed institutions to erect barriers of one kind or another and still not fear the loss of custom. There is little evidence to indicate the situation will change in the foreseeable future. Yet, given the huge annually recurring and accumulated demand for higher education, there is a ready-made case for institutions to consider radical and imaginative solutions. Sensible, sensitive, socially conscious and pedagogically imaginative policies are required to open the doors of academe a lot wider than current archaic customs and traditions allow.

(iv) Quality and relevance: Many who have participated in developing courses and student support systems will say that flexible and open learning educational practices demand a much more disciplined and sensitive approach to the teaching process. As courses are often available in the public domain, the transparency of content and the quality of instruction make it unavoidable to aspire for high quality. Similarly, open learning initiatives by definition are meant to help reduce inequities to educational access. Denial to learning for large parts of the population due to economic, social and other reasons go against the spirit of national and international conventions on the rights of individuals.

(v) Clear public accountability and social commitment of our autonomously governed institutions of learning: Like the case of Ireland, Indian universities and colleges need to respond to their country's legislation pertaining to a person's right to educational access. That it has not done so is a sad reflection

on how quickly we become insensitive as a nation to the demands of ordinary citizens. While governments generally have a greater responsibility in ensuring a citizen's right is protected, those of us who have leadership of institutions cannot abdicate our share of that responsibility.

6. As I remarked earlier, the Sub-Theme of this session is very much at the heart of the mission and mandate of the Commonwealth of Learning. As long ago as the mid-80s, Heads of Governments of the Commonwealth were compelled to confront the huge demand for higher education in the Commonwealth. One of the solutions that they found attractive was the establishment of open learning facilities in member states to cater for a diversity of learners in changing circumstances and having different learning goals. They recognised that just as our ideas on the purpose, functions and values of universities have been changing so too the nature of learners. Globally, some 82 million young people, mainly between the ages of 18 and 25, populate our campuses today. Except for a small proportion, most are full-time students. Their lifestyles allow them to adjust to the demands of the institutions they study at and the call of faculty as to when and where learning should take place. The lucky ones amongst them are able to express a limited choice in the courses that they can enrol during the three- or four-year period they spend on campuses. The not so lucky, mostly found in the developing world, might not even have that choice; their studies and the time frame are strictly prescribed for them. They are expected to subject themselves to a set of assessment sessions whether or not they are ready for them, and if they do not meet some unstated requirements, they are considered failures. This tradition is long-standing; say about a few centuries old. The 82 million or so young people who subject themselves to this process is a small proportion of the age cohort, which globally may number as many as 560 million. In the case of India the 3000 colleges and 200 universities cater for about 7% out of a total pool of 20 million matriculates annually.

7. In the new knowledge society that we all speak of and which nations aspire to achieve speedily, at least in economically well-developed nations, learning can no longer be the monopoly of the 18 to 25 age group nor can it be limited to full-time study. An increasing number of students can be expected to be part-time, employed, above 25 and making a late entry into higher education. In addition to these, many who are today's non-participants in education will need to be brought into the fold if we are at all serious about offering all people equal opportunity. Such a diversity of learners will require courses to be organised so that they are flexible, can be studied off-campus and credits received are portable. These students arrive at study with skills (to learn by themselves), knowledge (of themselves and what they want) and experience (to enrich curriculum and the learning environment). In other words, they are as much contributors to the learning as they are receivers of the knowledge. In this (knowledge) society, everyone will participate in education or training (formal or non-formal) throughout life. It would be a society characterised by high standards but with low failures. Such a society will offer a seamless canvass for individuals to start their learning anywhere on the canvass and exit at any point. To switch metaphors, they will be on a ladder of continuing attainment.

8. Recognising that there is a global consensus to make education a lifelong need for all citizens, universities must see a central role for themselves in the environment. Indian universities cannot be

outside of this changing culture. If you accept my premise, then there are some things that need your attention. Let me list a few that are crucial:

(i) Changing the current culture of instructional practices: The first challenge is the re-orientation of our teachers and the pedagogy they apply to their vocation. The profession will have to come to terms with a new type of learner and a learning environment that encourages the learner to be independent. Whether it is a classroom, radio or television programme, print or web-based instruction, instructors need to recognise that individuals are capable of self-learning, if provided with cleverly and sensitively designed instruction, even though they may be poorly equipped to utilise the technology imaginatively and skilfully. Moving the paradigm from a faculty-centred to a learner-centred environment is not only respectful of the learner but also of the teacher. Tagore, our great poet, expressed this sentiment in much more forceful terms when he said, "The main object to teaching is not to give explanations, but to knock at the doors of the mind. If any boy is asked to give an account of what is awakened in him by such knocking, he will probably say something silly. For what happens within is much bigger than what comes out in words. Those who pin their faith on university examinations as the test of education take no account of this" (Tagore, date unknown but quoted in his autobiography by Dutta and Robinson).

(ii) Freeing classrooms from time-bound regimes: Flexible learning will require us to seriously reconsider the "time-driven" element from today's schools, colleges and universities. Our institutions are ruled by time, prescribing when, in his/her life, a student can or is ready to learn and the length of time required for learning. Not too long ago, an international study recorded that "The instructional paradigm, holds learning a prisoner to time constraints applied by an arbitrary force or by the preferred work schedule of a faculty member. In the desired [new] learning paradigm, learning becomes the primary driving force and, since learning can occur at any time and at any place 24 hours every day, the constraints of time are removed". We have the technology and the knowledge today to deliver learning at any time, 24 hours a day.

(iii) Re-examining the campus-based delivery system: Already, outside of India, many universities and colleges are changing the nature and structure of their organisations. The traditions of teaching and the views on learning have resulted in organisational structures that are almost or completely centred on faculty: from the design of the curriculum to its transformation into learning experience; from decisions relating to assessment of prior learning to elements of exit standards; from administrative arrangements to academic governance; and from delivery systems to learning schedules. This will not be compatible with practices of flexible learning where learning is expected to take place at the convenience of the learner.

(iv) Re-examining the role of academics: Ways must be found to overcome the perceptions and the fear of faculty to the changing nature of their roles and values as well as the rewards of the new learning environment. There is a real, though unfounded, fear on the part of faculty in losing total control of the teaching and learning environment. This fear manifests itself in many forms. Some teachers express anger at the perceived loss of academic freedom and others express disdain at the 'commoditisation' of knowledge; some express dismay at the possible loss of employment and others worry about the potential loss of quality. Learner centrality in the educational environment does pose enormous challenges to the

teacher. It requires pedagogical skills, especially in a technology-mediated environment which many of today's teachers are either inadequate in or totally lacking. Serious steps have to be taken to reduce the anxiety of teachers and prevent alienating them from a development that is so crucial to academe and its survival.

(v) Becoming familiar with and practicing a greater use of technology to deliver learning: Universities must become greater users of technology to deliver mass education. The country's mass media and its penetration to the remotest corners of this land permit learning to be distributed beyond the bounds of campuses. In order to benefit from these assets, investments have to be made in staff training and development, and a different kind of administrative order must be explored.

(vi) Partnerships: India is a big country, but it also has colleges and universities that are well spread across the urban landscape of the nation. An opportunity exists to build upon existing collaborations and co-operative ventures and entering into new ones in designing, developing and delivering knowledge products at a much lower cost to individual institutions rather than getting engaged in a competitive culture.

9. In spite of poor policy support, abysmal resources and inadequate supply of instructional talent, distance education has grown in the last 30 years at phenomenal rates in almost all developing countries as well as developed ones. Those who championed the cause of open and distance education around the mid-60s would cite many good reasons for its inclusion in national educational provisions. Foremost among these were the political desire to increase provision for learning, the economic desire to cut the cost of education while increasing participation levels, the social desire towards egalitarianism to ensure equity and equality of opportunity and, at least in some locations, an educational desire to improve the relevance and quality of the curriculum. There were also those who wanted to reach the isolated, the marginalised, the challenged, and minority groups. The case presented for the inclusion of distance education in national educational provisions, especially by developing country enthusiasts, was especially high and as the evidence of the past 30 years shows, convincing as well. There are more distance education facilities in the developing parts of the world than the developed ones. Of the 10 mega-universities, I know of seven that are in the developing world and more are being created. The open universities of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe and Tanzania all have the potential to reach that mega-university status. Many new ones are being planned in the Middle East, West Africa and Latin America.

10. The adoption of distance and open education has enabled many nations to respond to increased demands especially for post-secondary education, to those previously denied such opportunities. Some institutions, like the Allama Iqbal Open University of Pakistan, took it upon themselves to be active in the pre-tertiary and non-formal sectors as well. The open universities of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh enrol between 100,000 and 150,000 students annually. Korea's National Open University and China's RTVU, as well as Thailand's STOU and Indonesia's UT, have student populations in excess of 200,000 to 500,000 each. The University of South Africa (UNISA), which claims seniority over the UKOU, reaches

out to most parts of Africa with its student enrolment of about 130,000. In Turkey, Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, there is much to be proud of in terms of the achievements of their universities. Apart from these dedicated systems, there are the external studies and off-campus departments of dual-mode universities that also use distance education to reach out to new clients.

11. In India, for example, the total enrolments of external students in dual-mode institutions far outnumber those at the Indira Gandhi National Open University. Collectively, these institutions have indeed increased access to learning, gone some distance in introducing flexibility, they also seemed to have brought down costs and unintentionally may have also taken the first steps in placing the learner at the centre of the educational transaction. Some of them have used broadcast technologies as main drivers of educational distribution and others have developed capacities to enrich curriculum by the application of multi-media. The exploration of the technologies by distance educators has also had a positive impact on improving teaching in non-distance education institutions. Above all, distance education ventures seem to have proved that many individuals in our societies, regardless of the extent of prior learning, are perfectly capable of self-directed learning at tertiary levels if only instruction were designed sensitively and sensibly, respecting the learner and supporting him or her in the learning. That is the good side of the story. But in India, there is also a bad side.

12. In spite of the successes, the levels of disappointments have been high. These disappointments range from a failure by many institutions, on the one hand, to penetrate large parts of communities that have traditionally been marginalised by the higher education sector and, on the other, a reluctance to apply rigorous quality control in many of the ventures. In 1992, UNESCO published a report on A Survey of Distance Education in Asia and the Pacific. Reading through the report, one quickly discovers that, by and large, the open universities of the developing countries of Asia serve more or less the same sector of the population that their metropolitan campus-based counterparts have been serving. Students are mostly urban, middle class, have substantial prior learning, mostly male and white-collar workers. Provisions for and ease of access to those who do not fall within this newly privileged group are minimal and where they exist, learning support is almost non-existent. Gandhe went as far as to say that in India, despite having some 50 to 60 providers of open and distance learning, none have made any significant impact among the rural poor, the marginalised communities and women. Most of them have basically become sub-servers to conventional providers, due in part to a mindset that considered higher education a part of urban culture or worst still, as a cash cow to buttress cash-strapped universities, affordable by only those living in cities.

13. Notwithstanding these criticisms, by and large the desire to meet a social good and serve a very diverse clientele was very much the driving force behind the growth of distance and open education throughout the last three decades. Moving knowledge to suit the needs of the learner rather than moving bodies to suit the convenience of institutions seemed to respond to all of the requirements for learning and training in a knowledge-based society. With the advent of technology, distance education is being rediscovered again by a vast majority of tertiary institutions in developed economies.

14. Many of you, like me, know and recognise that learning has never been as freely available to the poor

as to the rich. It is easier for those in urban areas than for those in rural communities; people, whether marginalised by geography, race, religion, ability, have always found it difficult to access learning than non-marginalised populations; women have found it more challenging to go to school than men; and, most importantly, in the context of this Sub-Theme of your conference, those who have more prior learning have always found it easier to access more new learning than those without. You have the power to change things.

15. There is a time to hold back and let things take their normal course and there is a time to take leadership and bring about change. In the delivery of learning, the time to bring about change is NOW. Otherwise, the people of this country will continue to be deprived of a fair opportunity to make a better life for themselves and learn a greater respect for their country. While Vice Chancellors of India's universities may feel that it is beyond them to bring about a nation-wide revolution, I say to you that they can at least bring about changes within the smaller communities they work in. In urging you to do this, I am reminded yet again of Rabindranath Tagore, who in 1939 confessed "I cannot take responsibility for the whole of India . . . If I can free only one or two villages from the bonds of ignorance and weakness, there will be built, on a tiny scale, an ideal for the whole of India, . . . Fulfill this ideal in a few villages only and I will say that these few villages are my India".

16. This must be true for all of us in 2001, as it was for Tagore in 1939.