Online Learning – A Social Good or Another Social Divide?

Online Learning - A Social Good or Another Social Divide? International Conference on Learning and Teaching Online, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China, 10 January 2001

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Introduction

Salutations

Lest you mistake me for a Luddite, after reading the abstract of this presentation, let me assure you quite unequivocally that my passion for distance education as well as the new variants of it, such as the theme of this conference, is still as high as it was some 30 years ago when I began my association with the field in Malaysia.

Having said that, like many others of my generation, who benefited from and saw the value that education made to one's personal circumstances, I was motivated to be part of a movement that brought down barriers to accessing learning. 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 marginalised whether by geography, race, religion, abilities, have always found it difficult to access learning than non-marginalised populations. Most importantly, in the context of this conference, those who had more prior learning have always found it easier to access more new learning than those without.

Distance Education

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. There are many reasons for this growth but none is as compelling as the hunger for learning felt by those who have been denied it for generations for many of the reasons that I just cited. This paper reflects on the role and performance of distance and open learning systems, especially in developing countries and, in the light of that history, considers the present passion for on-line learning in
the context of globalisation, intelligent technologies, competition and quality issues. The paper draws extensively on my experience in developing country situations, nonetheless, some of the issues discussed, invariably have relevance in a broader, global context.

Those who championed the cause of open and distance education around the mid-sixties would cite many good reasons for its inclusion in national educational provisions. Foremost amongst these were the political desire to increase provision for learning, the economic desire to cut the cost of education while increasing participation levels, the egalitarian social desire 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 (Reddy, 1988; Sirisaan, 1987; Ansari, 1982; Gitau, 1982; and Brandon, 1999). There were also those who wanted to reach the isolated, marginalized, challenged and minority groups (Dhanarajan, 1999). 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 that Daniel (1998) identified, seven 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. Remarkable as they are in their existence, their performance, on the other hand has been mixed. Almost like many of their counterparts in the developed world, these institutions have done extremely well in some aspects and badly in others.

The adoption of distance and open education has enabled many of the developing 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. South Africa's 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, etc., 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. In India, for example, the total enrolments of external students in dual mode institutions far outnumber those in the National Open University (Manjulika and Reddy, 1996). Collectively, these institutions have indeed increased access to learning, 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.
Despite these successes, the levels of disappointment have also been high. These disappointments stem on the one hand from a failure by many institutions to penetrate large parts of communities traditionally marginalized by the higher education sector and, on the other, from a reluctance to apply rigorous quality control in many of the ventures. In 1992, UNESCO (Suk-Ying Wong et al) 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, male, white collar workers from the middle class who have substantial prior learning. Provisions for and ease of access to those who do not fall within this newly privileged group are minimal and where they exist, support for learning to them is almost none. Gandhe (1999) went as far as to say that in India, none have made any significant impact among the rural poor, marginalized communities and women, despite some 50 or 60 providers of open and distance learning. Most of them had 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.

Online Learning

Despite the criticism, by and large the desire to meet a social good was very much the driving force behind the growth of distance and open education throughout the last three decades. It had resulted in, at least in the tertiary sector; the great open universities of the twentieth century such as the CRTVU system and KNOU, IGNOU, STOU the OUUK and others that many of you are familiar with. So then, what are the forces that are driving the interest in on-line learning? Is it for reasons of social good that the academic world is embracing this innovation or are there less socially compelling reasons? To get a sense of this, I browsed the Internet, where during the last two years there has been a lot of traffic on the subject. Even casual observers of the discussion could not fail to notice that both the enthusiasts and detractors of this innovation identify a number of conflicting forces at play. Among these, the seven that caught my eye, in their order of importance are:

1. The Market: More than any other force the Market seems to be amongst the most compelling of reasons for many providers of education to get on line. This is not surprising. Depending on whose statistics you accept, the total global expenditure on education can range from US$1 trillion (WTO, 2000) to about US$2.1 trillion (Smith, 2000). The second figure seems to include all of the money spent by corporations and others on training as well. If the WTO has its way, then it is very likely that within my lifetime, trade in education will be open to global competition and is expected to surpass all other trade in the services sector (Chambers, 2000). Many observers of the WTO expect this trade to be part of the negotiations in the next round of talks. It is therefore not too difficult to see why predatory entrepreneurs and cash strapped vice-chancellors find on-line delivery an attractive opportunity. In pure international trade terms, the service is worth around US$27 billion and major suppliers of the trade are nations of the G8 community, with the USA and France leading the pack. Generating around $7 billion worth of service trade for the US, education exports rank fifth in their earning capacity. Only the naïve will believe that this trade is meant to be a social good despite exhortations from many that this is indeed the case. As one Mr. Michael Gafney, CEO of one of Canada's newest Virtual Universities, Landsbridge, recently said,
"We are not here for charity or for the public good . . . our investors are looking for a return and we have to deliver high-quality programs that meet their demands".

2. Globalisation and Competition: The emergence of a global economy based on knowledge industries, free trade and open markets have all created opportunities for businesses to profit from standardised products and services internationally. There are many in higher education who believe that the same could be done with education. Standardised curriculum using English as the medium of instruction could be developed especially in fields such as science, technology, mathematics, languages and business studies at a few centres and distributed globally. On-line provision is the opportunity that they cherish. This is further reinforced by fears of competition from offshore brand named providers. Getting on-line has therefore become the buzz of the higher education sector concerned first with keeping out or up with the competition on the one hand and exploiting new opportunities on the other. Developing knowledge products at a few places to support the trade in education certainly has a few people worried. For example: Levine (as quoted by Seeman, 2000) who fears that " . . . in the next few years we're going to see some firm begin to hire well-known faculty (from) our most prestigious campuses and offer an all-star degree over the Internet. So they will take the best faculty from Columbia, Oxford and Tokyo Universities and offer a programme at a lower cost than we can" and, Noble (as quoted by Young, 2000) who, despising current developments, says that " . . . the current mania for distance education . . . (bears a) striking resemblance to a past today's enthusiasts barely know about or care to acknowledge, an earlier episode in the commodification of higher education known as correspondence instruction . . . ."

3. Technology: itself has become a central force in driving the on-line agenda. The belief that technology as an empowering tool is all that is required to develop on-line courses is fairly widespread. The potential of the technology to support the development and delivery of learning and training is truly amazing. Innovations in the WWW and structured information tools can assist in personalising content and improve customer relationship management systems. As David Porter (Porter, 2000) recently commented, there is now "the opportunity to implement learning systems based on knowledge management principles that will require us to design the 'units of learning' in a more granular fashion than we have done in the past." These trends are guided principally by standards created by industry. One such is the IMS Global Learning Consortium specification statement (http://www.imsproject.org) which include:

i. Standards-based learning systems based on structured information model.

ii. Learning objects - design, development, use, reuse.

iii. Granularity - scalability.

iv. Interoperability.

v. Customisation and extensibility - use case.

vi. Collaboration.
This movement is spearheaded by a consortium of mostly North American technology developers, vendors and universities, and may well become a global standard. To benefit from such standards will require very high investments and extensive integration of an organisation's educational functions with its administrative systems. This type of expensive system transformation, under present circumstances, may be possible only through partnerships and alliances especially with the private sector. As many who have been following the ongoing saga of an effort called UNIVERSITAS 21 know, this is not easy despite the media hype.

1. Cost: is cited as an important factor to go on-line. In times of diminishing resources and increased expectations, proponents of on-line education suggest that through partnerships, alliances, acquisitions and shared curriculum, costs of delivering education on-line can be reduced. The experience of the Open University UK is cited as an example. However, just like many of us in the past had grappled without much success in establishing the real cost of earlier generations of distance education ventures, so too, now, those attempting to estimate the real cost of on-line courses. The difficulties of working out comprehensive and real costs are compounded by many factors not the least of which "is little awareness of specific costing issues and little uniformity of costing approaches" (Bacsich, 1999). There is a also a very strong view that the "very few people understand the technical issues of arriving at reliable costing, as it is often assumed by most academic staff that costing is a precise science rather than a qualitative art" (Anon, 2000). Notwithstanding these views, common sense should tell us that if the intention is to design, develop, establish and run an institution that fits Porter's (2000) model, it could not be inexpensive. Some examples cited by the British Study on Borderless Education seem to confirm this. For example:

i. An estimate by Arizona Learning Systems in 1998 put the cost of developing a virtual course at US$1 million.

ii. An estimate by an American State University that an on-line course cost US$1.6 million to develop.

iii. As long ago as 1989 when Rumble estimated that the cost of developing one computer based OUUK course to be about 1.54 million sterling with a further 368,000 sterling annually to run it.

iv. Wagner (1999) in Canada, estimated that it may cost between Cdn$3 to 4 million to produce a course.

Many of you would consider these costs high, and that empirical evidence in your local area especially may indicate the contrary. You would be right if you discount one critical area. That area is QUALITY. If the purpose of on-line delivery is simply to present on the computer screen what teachers would normally present on the blackboard in a classroom, it is possible to run inexpensive courses on-line. But on the other hand, if one wishes seriously to exploit the full potential of the Web, then the figures mentioned above are very modest.

2. Pedagogy (Teaching and Learning): The quality of teaching in universities the world over has been a subject of intense criticism for well over the last three decades. Attempts to improve, in response to student agitation and protest and government frustration, have at best been lukewarm for a variety of reasons. Many see the ICT environment in which on-line courses exist, making a significant contribution
to the improvement of pedagogy. There is sufficient evidence to support that ICT-mediated instruction is as good as conventional instruction when done well. Those who support "constructivist" learning, especially, will argue that where students have to work in rich information environments, ICT-mediated teaching offers a very rewarding learning experience. The teaching here is meant to help students as they actively engage in learning by using information and materials to construct their own understanding and knowledge. Students learn by doing and teachers become navigators rather than being the sole source of knowledge. Teachers do this by providing students with self-paced, self-directed and problem-based learning experience and then follow this up by testing student learning in new interactive and interesting ways to assess the depth of their understanding of content and processes (Blurton, 2000).

3. Flexibility: Full-time study within the time-tabled constraints of classrooms is only accessible to a few; for many who wish to study, learning will necessarily have to be at a time and place of their choice. Globally, about 900 institutions make provisions available to 3 to 4 million off-campus students; a sign of the growth and demand for flexible, non-full-time studies. The rapid changes taking place in the workplace will require training to be delivered quickly. Such training must be high speed, low cost and capable of reaching small and large groups. Traditional ways of delivering training are time consuming, labour intensive, socially disruptive and costly. On-line courses offer a solution.

4. Access: to learning for those living in remote areas and who are marginalized, isolated or challenged can all be served on-line. Either synchronously or asynchronously, barriers such as time and distance could be overcome and the best teachers in the land can be invited to teach the most deprived communities and individuals.

During the last few years, I have been fortunate to be both a participant in, as well as a witness to, discussions and developments in distance education including on-line teaching in many parts of the world. These opportunities have given me certain insights, especially to appreciate the gap between hype, expectations and reality. While on the one hand, the use of ICT resources for purposes of education is welcomed as one of the greatest opportunities to enlarge the service to cover hitherto unreachable populations in times of diminishing resources and increased expectations, on the other there is also a growing recognition that our attempts to use the ICTs should not be leading us down the path of once again erecting barriers that have been gradually brought down over the last 50 years. Report after report have begun to emerge stating that we are on the brink of creating yet another barrier between those who have and those who have not, that ICTs are indeed increasing the gap between the rich and the poor, the knowledgeable and the knowledge deprived, the information rich and the information poor, the connected and unconnected. It is in this context that I would like to take four of the seven driving forces that I described earlier to consider their reality:

- **Access:** You will notice that Access is the last item on the list. Perhaps it is a reflection of its priority. This does not mean that all those desirous of promoting on-line learning are devoid of any sensitivity to deprived, marginalized or underprivileged populations. Many are in fact very sensitive, but the desire or ambition to be part of the bandwagon is so strong that disenfranchising those without access to appliances, connections and skills to use the ICTs get ignored in this relentless pursuit for position and profit. Disenfranchisement, as a consequence of using new
tools to deliver the educational service, is not unique to the poor countries of the developing world. It is fairly universal. A report published by the College Board in Princeton, New Jersey, warns that the Internet could become an engine of inequality. Poor kids, the report argues, are less likely to be familiar with the technology or have access to the equipment. As an example, the report cites that three-quarters of households with incomes greater than US$75,000 a year have computers, as opposed to one-third with incomes between US$25,000 and 35,000, and one-sixth of those with incomes less than US$15,000 (quoted by Grossman, 1999). This, in a country where the penetration of the net is reaching the 43% point (135.7 million users) [http://www.doe.tased.edu.au/0278/issue/003/375.htm] as compared to say China's 2% (20 million) [http://www.srktech.com/4.1.html (site no longer works)] or India's 3% (3.1 million) [http://www.education.indiainfo.com (site no longer works)]; Vietnam or Indonesia, where the penetration is even less. Many amongst us who are perpetual optimists would like to believe that this situation is likely to change very quickly, but if experience with an older technology called the TELEPHONE is anything to go by, our optimism may seem a little misplaced.

• Cost: While the concern regarding access must continue to preoccupy any discussion about On-Line Learning, equally important will be the cost of such provision to both the users or students and the providers, whether they are individuals, corporations, colleges and universities. Coopers and Lybrand, a consulting firm, in an analysis of the cost of producing an on-line course in 1998, came to the conclusion that software that captures the many facets of the learning process and can substitute campus-based learning is not yet (cheaply) on the market. This may not be the case today, but what certainly is the case is their finding on how much it could cost to produce a high quality on-line course. Their estimate was around US$3 million for the software and another $500,000 for annual maintenance cost without including marketing and distribution. This does not include the cost of faculty. From the potential students point of view, besides paying the basic tuition cost, they also have to meet the additional costs of appliance, appropriate software, Internet connection and subscription costs, paper costs, cost of books, etc. Even after amortising all of these, the personal cost to the user reaches the unaffordable level very quickly among low-income users. The question for people like you and me, is very simple - in wishing to remove some barriers through on-line delivery, have we created bigger ones in its place? Many people, at least in the short-term, think we have.

• Pedagogy: In a recent article by Sir John Daniel, Vice Chancellor of the OUUK, who also rightly claims that the university has the largest number of on-line students bemoaned that "Academics (who) have invented many of the technologies that define the 20th century . . . have been very slow to apply (that) technology to their teaching (Daniel, 1999)". Sir John is not the first person to draw our attention to the slow speed of technology diffusion into the teaching environment. Ten years earlier, Bill Renwick and colleagues, in an OECD report (1995), made similar observations in a series of studies published by the OECD. Getting the pedagogy right requires a whole host of considerations starting with staff skilled in using technologies to deliver learning, and in the absence of such skills to have in place staff development provisions, support staff and facilities, course development teams, time-off for staff for designing, creating, reviewing and reproducing learning materials. These are not new to academe (many dedicated open universities already have such environments), however they are absolutely critical to on-line learning. Typically,
governments and institutions still invest big money into technology but do very little in developing staff. Not too long ago, Tim O'Shea of Birbeck College described this pedagogic unpreparedness of an e-university in the making as a big blunder (waiting to happen). He went on to say that that blunder is associated to the idea of presenting knowledge in 'bite sized chunks' (= Potter's granularity) assuming "that such (chunks of) knowledge can be brought in from a variety of suppliers in bite-sized chunks meeting a certain learning objective. (But) Suppose each chunk is a Web page, there are just two routes from each page. (Say) A learner enjoys 10 chunks (to achieve the learning objectives). As Richard Smallwood of MIT pointed out in 1962, there could be 2x2x2x2x2x2x2x2x2x2x2 routes before the 11th chunk. The learner is lost, and the educational designer cannot meaningfully map out the routes if there is one clear lesson from the Open University and from Birbeck College in London, it is that we must design courses of reasonable size with coherence and appropriate maps. Otherwise our heterogeneous bands of part-time learners, part-time tutors, course designers will wander in circles, revisiting one chunk again and again and never finding others . . ." (T. O'Shea, 2000).

• Technology: There is, perhaps, one snag in achieving all of the great potentials of technology that I spoke of earlier. In a 1995 report by CERI of the OECD, authors examined a range of technologies from electronic publishing, narrow and broad casting by radio and television, audio and video conferencing as well as digital networks. The report concluded that while the older technologies were used for limited instructional purposes, the newer technologies, like the electronic and digital networks, were used mostly for the transmission of information through electronic mail, bulletin board systems, computer conferencing and electronic data base retrieval. The report concluded by stating that "the essence of the educational culture is not seen to be changing; at best instructors and institutions are using technology to replicate their practise, their content and their control . . . The influence of technology on schooling, learning, teaching and the educational organization has not been significant across the range of post secondary education."

Though there have been even greater changes in the technology environment since 1994, in as far as the educational environment is concerned, the situation does not seem to have changed significantly. In a more recent report coming out of Australia, authors Craig Cunningham et al, mention that "The use of new technology and new media is in many cases still in its experimental stages . . . This may well change in the future, as programs become more established and appropriate technological infrastructure becomes more widely available." In the next section of this presentation, I would like to share with you, what I think are the issues that need to be confronted if the hype of technology is to be realised and make a difference to global education.

In the developed economies, the reluctance to apply learning technologies more enthusiastically may be rooted in serious fundamental educational processes and their values. In developing economies, this is further compounded by four other factors. These, according to a recent report by PANOS, are:

1. Poor telecommunications infrastructure: The level of "teledensity" has not reached the stage where the Internet can function efficiently. One telephone line per 1000 heads of population is not the greatest of assets when contemplating an educational service for large parts of the poor world. Coupled to this is a lack of access to "bandwidth".
2. Cost of appliance: It is said that problems of access to telecommunications pale into insignificance besides those of gaining access to a working computer capable of connecting to the Internet. The International Telecommunication Union comments that an inhabitant in a poor country is around 8,000 times less likely to have access to a computer than someone from an OECD country. Even as recently as 1996, one in three people globally lacked access to electricity. Analysts claim that the cost of putting a computer in every home with the necessary telecommunication infrastructure will continue to be prohibitive in the medium term. Consider this as an example: the average cost of a personal computer is 15 times the per capita GDP of Ethiopia.

3. Know how: at least three specific kinds of skills are relevant, necessary and in short supply. These are:
   
   • Participatory skills: from computer literacy to a working knowledge of English for involvement in networked learning.
   
   • Facilitating skills: for the design, implementation and maintenance of networks. These require technical knowledge in installation, user training and maintenance at the minimum.
   
   • Control skills: to manage the enterprise.

4. Cost of services: Poverty is not the only problem facing those wanting access to the Internet. In many countries, policy and regulatory restrictions make it almost impossible for a vast proportion of their population to have access to inexpensive telephone and Internet services, due to monopolies of one kind or another. As another example, in the USA, the average cost for an ISP (Internet Service Provider) to lease a high capacity line is around $3,800. The same line will cost about US$180,000 a year for an Argentinian ISP. Access to the Internet in Canada is about US$15 per month, for China it is about US$70 per month.

All of these simply mean that far from being an asset technology or at least the lack of access to it can very well become the barrier to education for many. The market does not recognise deprivation; equity and equality must be addressed by the public sector vested with the task of providing the service.

Towards a Social Good

One would be foolish to question the importance and relevance of the Internet and the WWW for education in this new decade. At its worst, it has the ability to connect communities of learners and teachers as well as other knowledge seekers and providers and at its best it could very well be the tool that education has been waiting for these past thousand years. Its promise is only limited by the imagination and capacity of the people who can apply and benefit from it. However, access to that promise should not be limited to only a few who are wealthy, live in information rich societies, having skills, knowledge and support to use the tools but also be provided to the many who lack all of these but who need education and training just as much as the 'haves' to escape from traps of deprivation. To benefit the many, we must get some things right about on-line education. These must include:
1. Developing policies that preserve our concerns for equity and equality of access: At the governmental level these must, of necessity, touch on telecommunication policies and regulations, tariffs, telecommunication infrastructure, etc. At the institutional level there is also a need for those who are aggressively pushing for the delivery of education ON Line to remind themselves that the purpose of education is ill served if the methods we adopt deny that education to a great majority of our people. Policies on education of almost every democratic state in the modern world are unambiguous about this ideal. But between the ideal and practise a gap often emerges especially amongst our autonomous institutions. There is urgency in reinforcing the policy as was done by Don Thornhill, Chairman of the Higher education Authority of Ireland in 1999, who said, "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." (As quoted by Skilbeck and Connell, 2000). In so stating, Thornhill was resonating an Equal Status Bill of the Republic which makes it the responsibility of an educational establishment not to discriminate in relation to:

- The admission or the terms or conditions of admission of a person as a student to the establishment.
- The access of a student to any course, facility or benefit provided by the establishment, etc., etc.

It seems to me that there is a case to be made in relation to on-line courses, for creating policy guidelines that makes it necessary for providers of such services to make appropriate provisions (such as free supply of appliances, connections, etc.) to marginalised groups in order for them to benefit from on-line courses.

2. Identifying the fitness of purpose of on-line courses: Current levels of academic preparedness, administrative and ICT infrastructure make it necessary to define a clear purpose for engaging in on line courses. Training programmes rather than academic courses may better fit this new form of delivery. Under present circumstance there is a group that may have reasonable access to the necessary ICT infrastructure to participate in on-line education. These are people who are already in the workforce (globally, some 2 billion people) and need reskilling, continuing professional development, post-graduate training, updating of knowledge, etc. There is a strategic advantage in focusing on this group of people first, and as communication infrastructure as well as other services related to supporting the ICTs become more commonplace, move on to academic programmes gradually.

3. Investing in people even faster than investing in technology: At the risk of stating the obvious - let me simply ask the question: what good is a digital environment if the skills and interests of the key players are not there, to use its potential effectively? Being Internet savvy does not necessarily make a teacher an effective on line educator. Very few institutions are investing sufficient resources to train staff to teach on line.

4. Use of other ICTs rather than limiting ourselves to the Internet only: while this conference is on Online courses, let me make a plea for the greater exploitation of other ICTs. The short-term benefit is the easy accessibility of such technologies as radio, video, print by large parts of our populations. The long-term benefits include carrying forward knowledge products so produced into the Internet environment.
5. Planning for sustainability and success: A good portion of the 50,000 or so courses that are currently available on the Internet in North America today may not be available next year. In fact, a number of online course providers today may not be there next year. Remember the University of California’s grand scheme!! I do not think a large part of the world is quite ready for non-sustainable educational ventures or adventurers. We need planning and sustainability, we need to ensure customer protection and we need to keep "diploma mills" out. We cannot do any of these if public institutions themselves become the perpetrators, doing not much for education other than selling their brand name.

6. Good practice: we need to develop global not just North American standards of good practice. Practices that will help continue the traditional values of and respect for education, pastoral care of students, respect for academic freedom and dignity, quality of the content and tuition, excellence in exit standards and, above all, an education that is available for all and helps build good citizens. The market is important and it is seductive, but its seduction should not be allowed to turn a social good into a social divide. It took some 30 years by those who were engaged in the promotion of distance education to gain respect for it, recognition and acceptance - sentiments that were lost during an earlier era as a result of bad practice by many who engaged in correspondence education. We do not want on-line courses to suffer the same disrespect of earlier correspondence education.

Ladies and gentlemen, your conference over the next few days will examine much more profoundly and with greater erudition than I am capable of, many of the things that my limited knowledge enabled me to speak on. I will be interested in your discussions and from it learn lessons that will be helpful for us at The Commonwealth of Learning [http://www.col.org] as we work with some of the most educationally deprived populations in the world.

I thank you for your gracious attention and wish this conference well.

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