

A Time for Vision



*A Time for Vision by Lewis Perinbam, O.C., LL.D.
Senior Advisor, External Relations, The Commonwealth
of Learning, Vancouver to the World Conference on
"Education India: the Next Millennium" New Delhi,
India, 12 November 1997*

Transcript

I count it a privilege to participate in this World Conference on Education India: the Next Millennium. It is an imaginative endeavour and I congratulate Professor Mukhopadhyay and his associates for convening it, in this historic year that marks India's 50th year of independence. The subject you have chosen is of vital importance not only to India but also to the rest of the world, for education is the cornerstone of a nation's development and shapes its future.

At the outset I should explain that my presence is due to the inability of Dr. Raj Dhanarajan, the President of The Commonwealth of Learning to be here. He is profoundly disappointed that a prior commitment prevented him from coming. He sends his regrets and good wishes for a successful conference.

I am especially honoured to participate in a session dedicated to the memory of one of India's most distinguished sons, the late Professor G. Ram Reddy. I was privileged to know him as an associate and as a friend for whom I had the highest respect. As a member of the Board of Governors of The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and as COL's first Vice President he served our organisation with distinction. In doing so he also brought great credit to India.

It is always a joy to come to India because of my roots in this great land. My parents emigrated from India to Malaysia but retained their links with their homeland. I am proud to be a citizen of Canada but I also value my Indian heritage.

I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge The Commonwealth of Learning's enormous debt to India. The late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi played a notable role in its creation. Since then India has contributed generously to COL, provided valuable services and given us outstanding people, like the late Dr. Ram Reddy, Professor R.V.R Chandrasekhara Rao, former Vice Chancellor of the Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University (Hyderabad), Professor O.S. Dewal, Founding Director of the National Open School and Dr. Abdul Khan, our Principal Communications Specialist, Educational Media and Non-Formal Education.

India's support of COL reflects the importance it attaches to distance education as a vital instrument to widen access to learning for its citizens and as an integral element in its educational system. This was

manifest in the creation of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). It was envisioned, among other things to be a practical means of democratising Indian education "by extending educational opportunities to all corners of the country" as the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi put it.

In our lifetime our planet has undergone one of the most dramatic transformations in its history. It has moved from the aftermath of the industrial revolution to a new era in which knowledge, information and new technologies shape our lives. Yet, despite the scientific and technological changes that have swept the world, over one billion people in the developing countries are engulfed in abject poverty and nearly one billion are illiterate.

India's educational heritage goes deep into her history and culture. The ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro reflected levels of economic and social advancement that other countries did not reach for thousands of years. India's contributions to education, science and culture distinguish her among the nations of the world. Two thousand years ago the world's oldest university, Taxila, was located in the Indian sub-continent and attracted students from many parts of Asia and the Middle East.

Today India holds a pre-eminent position in the world of learning and is contributing significantly to the advancement of science and technology. Just over a month ago, on September 29, 1997, India launched its first fully operational satellite from an Indian-built rocket. It is reported that "the 1,200 kilogram, remote sensing satellite will identify mineral deposits and marine resources, assess crop yields, locate independent underground water and estimate damages caused by floods and droughts." What a splendid way to mark India's 50th anniversary as a free nation.

The world faces formidable challenges however, as our planet stands on the threshold of a new millennium. As the UNESCO Commission on Education for the 21st Century (the Delors Report) noted, about one fifth of the globe is illiterate with increasingly dysfunctional school systems where the need is greatest. Furthermore, the numbers are growing - 6.2 billion people by 2000. Countries least able to support the burgeoning populations under 15 years of age have the highest growth rates, are the least equipped to educate, to provide jobs and to assure adequate health and social services. The resulting rapid urbanisation with its attendant exploitation of cheap labour, increased crime, violence and environmental devastation cries out for efficient educational reform and expansion.

The compelling implications for education are recognised by political leaders who understand the critical role of modernised education systems in the advancement of their societies. According to an Australian development agency some 150 million young people, mainly from developing countries, will seek access to tertiary education by the year 2025. Many more wishing to upgrade their skills will strive for admission to post-secondary institutions in the countries of the industrialised north. It is estimated that this educational demand will require the construction of one new university every week for the next 20 years. To remain competitive nations will require preparation for new kinds of employment as well as workforce re-training. Moreover, the continuing pressures for equality of opportunity will require nations to transform themselves into learning societies. Post-secondary educational facilities must be widened to reach those once considered unreachable.

Educating the one billion children lucky enough to find a place in classrooms and the 60 million students at universities and colleges costs approximately \$5 to \$7 billion dollars. What then would be the cost of:

providing literacy education to some 900 million adults world-wide;
making basic education available to 1 billion children;
re-skilling, retraining and keeping current a world-wide workforce of over 2 billion people who will most likely be working till 2025;
enabling some 700 million youth to be economically productive; and
making tertiary education available to no less than 150 million adults who desire it.

Governments must look beyond conventional approaches to create systems that deliver mass post-secondary education and training comprehensively and inexpensively. Fortunately, distance learning and new technologies have brought this challenge within our grasp. They have given us new tools for human resource development - namely the open learning institutions in the North and in the South. They have been instrumental in bringing access to knowledge to millions who were unreached or unreachable by conventional education systems.

For the first time in human history we possess the means to reach almost every community on our planet in a single moment. The technological revolution is affecting many facets of economic and social relations. The London Economist has referred to the "death of distance" as the greatest force changing and shaping our society. At the Commonwealth of Learning, for instance, our programming achievements in non-formal education through a combination of talent, human skills, knowledge and broadcasting technology include providing functional literacy in Ghana, agricultural extension in Jamaica and teacher education in the Maldives.

In formal education, while the capacity to reach millions through interactive media is not yet here, the efforts of the Open Schools of India and New Zealand and the Open Universities of Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia, the UK and Canada in reaching hundreds of thousands of students demonstrate what is possible. Recent reports by the World Bank, OECD and UNESCO predict that in the next decade distance education will be the most important mode of delivery for learning throughout life and for life but it should not be done in isolation.

To profit from research and experiments in distance education, educational organisations might profitably join forces with other countries' visionaries and collaborate with UNESCO, the International Telecommunications Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, to promote and support the 1996 African Information Society Initiative. This initiative is a worthy model - it targets the development of an Information Society as the key economic strategy for the African region (Hall, 1997:14). It includes cabinet level policy proposals which would lead to empowerment of all sectors - by 2110 all rural women and children will have access to information through telecommunications and computers (ibid).

Electronically linking traditional institutions should improve their morale, motivation and academic drawing power as well as their knowledge pool. However, faculty need to be enthusiastic users of the technology and able to serve real needs with it if its value is to be felt. There is a tendency to import

inappropriate software and confuse the availability of "hypertext links with the provision of interactive learning. In reality, exploring unstructured connections between unmediated sources of information could be quite contrary to teaching goals" (Hall, 1997:23).

The growing demands for more education, the lack of financial and, more importantly human resources, the erosion of quality in education systems, and the demands of the knowledge era for skills are propelling political leaders to crusade for educational reform - including making access to learning an easier process. Those with responsibility for developing skills and knowledge to meet national needs - in the arts, science, business, agriculture, technology and administration - are resorting to new and old technologies for this purpose in both developed and developing countries. Increasingly, educational institutions have taken education to their students regardless of the barriers of space, time, prior knowledge, gender and affordability. They are active in sectors as diverse as literacy programmes (Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan) to doctorates in education (The UK Open University). Some have only a few thousand students (University of Papua New Guinea) compared to others with as many as 400,000 students (Indira Gandhi National Open University). Some have been in distance education for about 50 years (University of South Africa) and others are brand new such as the University of Sarawak in Malaysia. Their offerings in distance education include courses from family medicine to philosophy, from computer science to art history, from communication technology to English language and literature. However, their effective reach remains inadequate.

Communications and information technologies that are coming into vogue possess enormous potential in educational delivery. Technology, however, does not teach. It enables the delivery of teaching and shifts the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the learner. This requires governments and agencies such as the World Bank, UNDP and the Regional Banks to bring distance learning into their sights, to give it a higher priority and to create an environment in which it can be used effectively. They can do so in the following ways:

- ensuring that the normally low status of Education Ministries be elevated to be on a par with, e.g., Defence Ministries with the attendant improvement in resources;
- creating a policy framework for open and distance learning to become an integral part of a nation's education base as has been done in India and South Africa;
- encouraging minimal standards of good practice for those involved in the delivery of open and distance learning as in Hong Kong - with the needed practical training, planning and independent evaluation;
- creating pathways for the free and easy movement of credits and credentials across the education system as in Canada; and
- requiring international donor and lending agencies and recipient governments to demonstrate a commitment by including open and distance learning in the educational planning framework of a country.

One of the major challenges is to persuade the educational establishment that distance learning is an opportunity that adds a new dimension to the educational process.. Universities must be more hospitable than they have been, and better equipped, to integrate distance learning into their systems so that it is part of the mainstream. They can help widen access to education and improve its quality. It will not only strengthen their capabilities but it will also enhance their place in the community by making them more

responsive to its needs.

If distance teaching universities and colleges are to succeed in accomplishing the country's most important economic task they must be equipped with teachers who are practical experts. They must have manifest ability to design the structures required for learner-oriented presentation of information, the interactive sessions so crucial to student learning, e.g., in a classroom extended by functioning technology to outlying centres. This means identifying the best of committed teachers and equipping them with facilitating skills. It means teaching them to use, and demonstrate in practice, an inductive approach - to listen intently, synthesise information and ideas, to encourage, stimulate and control discussion and interaction between and within sites (Khan, 1996:3).

Well-trained, effective, distance educators also have another role to play. They have to be more persuasive and forceful in marketing their capabilities and to connect with other sectors. They must inspire confidence in their worth and become energetic missionaries in bringing distance learning to the forefront of a knowledge-driven era.

There is another reason why distance learning and new technologies are important. India's open democracy is one of her most precious assets. But it remains threatened by her massive poverty and inequalities. It can be sustained and strengthened only if it is founded on an educated citizenry that possesses the knowledge, skills and capabilities to lead fulfilling and creative lives. The cost of a massive onslaught on the ancient enemies of poverty and illiteracy may be high but the cost of ignoring them will be far higher. This places India's educators in the forefront of a movement to banish poverty and ignorance within her shores and to build a future that is worthy of her peoples.

India can play a pivotal role in changing outmoded ideas because it has been a pioneer in harnessing distance and open learning to its progress and development. Its flagship Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), its seven State open universities, 58 Correspondence Course/Distance Education institutions have an enrolment of nearly one million students; while one National Open School and six state open schools have an enrolment of about 250,000 students.

This is an impressive record by any standards. However, more can be done. India must use her experience and talent in distance education to serve her needs for basic, primary and secondary education. Compare, for example, the difference between India, a market-driven economy and her nearest neighbour, China, a labour-driven command economy. While China emphasised primary and secondary education, India expanded its university sector at a rapid rate though at relatively low cost. By the 1980s, about 72% of the Indian labour force 25 years or older had no schooling versus 44% of the Chinese labour force. In other words the proportion of China's workforce with primary education was over three times that of India's labour force and almost twice the proportion of the Chinese labour force had attended secondary school. At the university level, the proportion of India's labour force is about four times that of China. Hence, a major thrust in primary and secondary education will be required if India wishes to maintain her competitiveness globally. (Dhanarajan, November 6-8, 1997: 4-5)

Distance education entities of the future will practice a variety of expanded skills and employ a range of

programmes and technologies from franchises at traditional campuses serving the science, technology and business science needs of those able to pay, to the subsidised, specially tailored programmes directed to learning centres during non-working hours. But they will succeed only with a political commitment to serving their nation's learning needs - the necessary financing and infrastructure.

We must acknowledge, however, that distance learning is not a panacea for all the ills facing education. Nor can we ignore that it has not always worked. Sometimes the human and technological infrastructure necessary for its success were not present. It requires both the trained people as well as technology that is appropriate, affordable and accessible. Conventional and distance education must work together and harness their respective capabilities. For they can do together what they cannot achieve working separately.

COL President, Dr. R. Dhanarajan, has referred to distance learning as "the educational wave of the future". It is the means for the developing countries to enable their peoples to advance to higher standards of living and to move forward to the next millennium with confidence. India can be the leader in fashioning a new global community in which illiteracy is banished and the world's peoples can shape their own future. Biblical teachings tell us that "where there is no vision the people perish". This is a time for vision and no nation is better equipped than India is to provide that vision.