

Education: Equalising Opportunities



*The College of Preceptors**
*(*now The College of Teachers)*

Charter Fellows Presentation Ceremony

University of London Institute of Education
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By
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- 1.** This ceremony and the conferment of a Fellowship by The College of Preceptors hold a special significance to me. First, I can finally claim professional legitimacy to being a teacher as, you would have just heard, my training is in biology and not in education, second by conferring this fellowship on me, the honour is not only personal but also a tribute to the many remarkable educational innovators of our time who have been making a case for distance education internationally over the past forty years or so, and finally, in humility, the privilege to claim fraternal relationship to a most distinguished group of alumni who in one way or another brought the light of learning to many many thousands of our fellow men and women. Distinguished Scholars, Ladies and Gentlemen:
- 2.** We still live in a world of great inequality. A good part of humanity is still denied access to an equal share of the planet's wealth, to justice, to a decent living; the disparity between those who have and those who do not in terms of food, health care and social security continues to be appalling. This disparity is not just between rich and poor nations but also within nations and communities. We have less than five years before we see the beginnings of the next millennium - an era during which human development should be measured not by scientific and technological progress alone, not by colonising distant galaxies and certainly not by the number of bombs, people at arms, etc., but by the simple yardstick of the level of equal opportunities for all.
- 3.** This audience does not need reminding that throughout the ages, education has been the most powerful agent of change. Our leading thinkers, political leaders, development specialists have time and again reiterated that the empowerment of individuals, through the provision of learning, a basic human right and social responsibility which must

therefore be protected. It is this overwhelming desire to empower individuals that led to those who met in Jomtein in 1990 to declare among other things that: ***every person - child, youth and adult should be able to benefit from education; opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs*** . Individuals such as yourselves have been at the vanguard of the movement to bring greater access and equity to educational opportunities.

4. That declaration and intention will remain a rhetoric as long as those of us who are in the practice of delivering education remain passive about accepting the challenge to educate every child, youth and adult. This is a challenge to our intellect and pedagogical skills at a time when fiscal resources are diminishing and technological capabilities are increasing. Consider the tasks:

. At the start of this last decade of the present millennium, there were more than 960 million adults who were illiterate; two-thirds of them are women and girls;

. More than 100 million children, mostly girls, currently do not have access to primary schooling and this number is growing;

. More than 100 million children and countless millions of adults fail to complete their basic education programmes, while millions more satisfy school attendance requirements but do not acquire essential knowledge and skills;

. More than one-third of the world's adult population (some 2 billion individuals) have no access to printed knowledge, new skills and technologies that could improve the quality of their lives and help them to shape social and cultural changes;

. On an annual basis, the world demand for higher education will increase at the rate of 8.2% and most of the increase will come from the lesser developed parts of the world which also have the least developed capacities to deliver the service.

5. The challenge is not limited to the volume of the need, it also extends to the variety of users and potential users of a nation's educational services. Besides the "normal" class of users, educational services will be needed by:

. ***Those who are functionally illiterate*** : apart from the 900 million illiterates, there are almost half as many adults who cannot cope with the demands of daily life on the basis of their literacy levels;

. ***The physically challenged*** : annually in Asia alone, 15 million people become disabled as a result of wars, diseases, accidents, malnutrition, etc. Their major hope of self improvement will have to be an education that reaches them;

. ***The long-term unemployed*** : long-term chronic unemployment is a pathology; training people in such situations will pose special pedagogical challenges;

. ***Women and girls*** : the gender gap, despite our knowledge of the benefits of women's education, continues to be appalling. Given the nature of cultural and religious hurdles,

ways may have to be found to circumvent these barriers to deliver education to an important half of humanity;

. ***Out of work youth, especially boys*** : require vocational training to be part of a productive economy; a combination of apprenticeship employment and self education can be of help in rehabilitation programmes; not having such provision of training and vocation is a catalyst for socially disruptive behaviours, social refusal and criminal activities by an undereducated and disgruntled population; and

. ***Refugees, recent immigrants and non-nationals*** : roughly, some 125 million people today live outside their country of origin. The flow or the movement of people, either for political or economic purpose, is not expected to slow down. To better enable the process of settling down educational programmes dealing with language, social and job skills are helpful and have to be designed.

6. To provide education or training to the large and very diverse users of the educational services will require teachers and their institutions to make fundamental shifts to the ways in which they fashion their curricula and deliver them. The assumptions of teachers and institutions as to the where, when and how of teaching will have to undergo profound changes. Courses will have to be organised so that learners can access them from wherever they are. The delivery methodology described as distance education, and which has been in use for the past thirty years or so by the many open universities around the world, may have to be considered as a major vehicle for educational delivery of the next century.

7. Around the world today, there are some 50 institutions that are totally dedicated to the delivery of education to students outside of campus walls. All of them have as their principal mission the intellectual enrichment, knowledge and skills acquisition of individuals who, for whatever reason, have not been able to fulfil their educational aspirations through traditional pathways. Except for a few, these open universities have, until recently, sought to increase opportunities for university level undergraduate studies only. This picture is, however, changing and we are increasingly seeing the delivery of courses in the non-formal, post-graduate and professional disciplines as well. Interestingly, the success of the open universities have begun to spur initiatives at the pre-tertiary levels also, especially in countries where the education of out-of-school youth becomes a national priority. But all of these efforts are still not enough.

8. In order to meet the anticipated demand without an equivalent increase in cost, then the volume of the supply through distance teaching institutions have to be a serious consideration. In 1994 globally, there were 16,000 post-secondary institutions and about 1.5 million pre-tertiary ones. The first had provisions for 60 million students and the latter close to 1.3 billion. To meet the global agenda for equality in opportunities, governments of the world need to double this capacity, using present and emerging technologies as well as encouraging ALL educating institutions to expand their provisions.

9. For the first time in the history of the human race, we have an opportunity, if we want, to reach almost every single community on the planet. The technology of our century has made it possible for us to reach millions in a single moment. Consider some examples of what has been possible in the last few years through the intervention of mass communication:

. In **Honduras**, the use of a specific oral rehydration solution to treat diarrhoea reduced risks of dehydration from zero to 40% of all episodes just one year after a systematic programme of public education was launched;

. In **South Africa**, part of the transformation from the viciousness of apartheid to participatory democracy required educating people not only on what democracy is but also their role in it; a mass voter education campaign took the population from being passive victims to active citizens in six months;

. In **India**, condom sales increased from fewer than 25 million in the late 1960's to more than 160 million in 1979, and 75% of the increase was accounted for by a new brand introduced through a marketing approach that relied heavily on consumer education; and

. In **British Columbia**, the Knowledge Network reaches almost the entire province with university-level courses in science, arts, economics, mathematics and human behaviour.

10. A revolution is taking place out there in the world of programming technology that is showing the way to expand teaching, training and educating. Some interesting examples mentioned at Jomtein in 1990 include:

. A rock video motivating young people in **Mexico** to delay sexual activities, thereby reducing health and psychological risks;

. A radio-based lottery in the **Gambia** that teaches rural women about a new remedy for diarrhoea;

. A mass campaign in **Turkey** to increase the catchment for child immunisation campaigns; and

. An introductory course in computing via the Internet with a pan-global outreach.

11. Existing and developing technologies have an as yet unrealised educational potential. But technology does not teach; it helps in the creation, production and delivery of teaching. It transforms the relationship between teachers and learners. While multimedia and hypermedia can bring all of the essence of print, audio and video signals, computer-aided instruction, group learning and conferencing under one umbrella, at the heart of this transaction there still will be teachers and their institutions who will have the power to humanise this relationship. The challenge for them will be to create the pedagogies.

12. Any revolution in the way we deliver instruction must start with the way we train our teachers. It seems to me that teacher training colleges and faculties of education must see

the use of technology as part and parcel of the skills of a teacher of the 21st century. Such skills should include using the technology as a source of information, as an instrument to analyse data and learning from it, as an instrument to design and develop curricula that are both instructional and interactive, as well as for the purpose of delivering instruction. A few innovative and experimental programmes in this area exist but experiments must turn to large-scale practise, soon, if we wish the world to benefit from these technologies.

13. If we accept the premise that education, more than any other factor, can make the difference between wealth and poverty, health and misery, conservation and destruction, national unity and division, then the levelling of educational opportunities must be a priority for all of us who care about our fragile planet and its inhabitants.