

The Commonwealth of Learning at 30



**Reflections by Sir John Daniel, O.C.
(President of COL 2004-12)**

14 June 2018

Dear Governors, Friends and Staff of COL:

I am very sorry that I cannot be with you to celebrate COL's 30th birthday, but tonight's event clashes with a meeting of the International Board of the United World Colleges that I am chairing in London.

My reflections today on COL's highly productive three decades of achievement take me back to its beginnings in the late 1980s, when I was involved in its creation in various ways.

First, in 1986 I was invited to the Commonwealth Secretariat in London to meet the Briggs Group, which was preparing its report, 'Towards a Commonwealth of Learning', that later provided part of the blueprint for COL.

Second, as Canada began to prepare to host the 1987 CHOGM in Vancouver, I joined a group convened by the Government of Canada to make proposals to the heads of government for greater use of satellite technology in distance learning.

Third, once the heads had decided to create COL, I was appointed chair of the planning committee. Its task was to translate their decision into a Memorandum of Understanding through which Commonwealth governments could formally create the organisation.

Fourth, I served on the search committee that appointed COL's first president, James Maraj. I little thought that I would face a similar committee 14 years later when I was a candidate for the job myself.

Finally, I was a member of COL's founding board of Governors for a year before I moved from Canada to the Open University in 1990.

I was president here at COL from 2004 to 2012. This gives me a perspective on COL both past and present, which makes me immensely proud of the tremendous achievements of COL's small band of competent and dedicated people.

These are difficult days for multilateralism. Indeed, they are difficult days for the whole post-World-War-Two consensus that led to the creation of the United Nations and other multi-lateral organisations. That consensus, built around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its aspirations for democracy and freedom, is also on the defensive today. This is distressing. Members of my generation mostly believe that multilateral consensus and action are the only answers to many of the challenges facing our world.

Maybe, as the US abdicates its traditional leadership role in promoting the post-World-War-Two consensus, other countries will rally round a greater appreciation of the importance of multilateralism. Meanwhile, however, COL has to work in the current environment of cynicism about multilateral institutions.

Nevertheless, I am sure that COL will continue to thrive because of the key principles on which it bases its action. I will mention just four.

First, COL has been very effective at defining its programmes and priorities after listening carefully to governments. This is one reason why COL gets such strong support at meetings of Education Ministers.

Second, COL operates at the grassroots and makes local institutions and individuals the primary agents of its work. Giving projects strong local ownership embeds them in that environment, thus ensuring that they evolve as circumstances change.

Third, COL's programmes have longevity. In my view this is a vital feature of successful development work. Yet many other agencies, in their eagerness to cut new ribbons, terminate projects after just a few years – just as they begin to show signs of success.

COL, in contrast, sustains its key programmes for many years. Both the Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme and the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth, to mention but two, predated my arrival here in 2004. Their present success – and the Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme has now reached hundreds of thousands of people in many countries – owes much to COL's persistence, perseverance and readiness to adapt to changing times.

Finally, COL has attracted outstanding staff. They must take the credit for its hugely beneficial impact on millions of Commonwealth people over 30 years. They also create the enormously stimulating working environment that I so enjoyed during my time as president.

We celebrate this 30th birthday with pride and I wish the Commonwealth of Learning continued success in the decades ahead.