

# Democratising Lifelong Learning for All

Video Presentation

3rd Lifelong Learning International Conference 2014  
Malaysia

20 November 2014

by

[Professor Asha Kanwar](#)

President & CEO

Commonwealth of Learning

Greetings to the organisers and all participants of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lifelong Learning International Conference, 2014. It is a pleasure to join you 'virtually' from Vancouver and I'm thankful to Dr Hisham Dzakiria for the invitation. The Commonwealth of Learning or COL, as you know, is an intergovernmental organization that helps Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of distance education and Information and Communication Technologies for expanding access to education and training. Our motto is 'Learning for Development' and we work in the formal, non-formal and informal sectors. Malaysia is a very important member of the Commonwealth and we are very grateful for your financial and intellectual contributions to COL.

The theme of the conference, 'Lifelong Learning Initiatives: new frontiers and sustainability' is as appropriate today as it was in the 1970s. The focus then was on *Lifelong Education* and in 1996 the Jacques Delors Report of UNESCO made the transition to Lifelong Learning. According to Preece, '*education*' indicates a more provider led model of learning activity, whilst '*learning*' suggests the focus is on the learner's needs. Similarly, *education* implies formal systems of provision, whilst *learning* suggests a wider notion of non-formal and informal systems. Clearly, we can see the shift to learner centric approaches, and the view that learning can take place in a variety of settings and contexts. The European Commission (2001:33) defines Lifelong Learning as '*all learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective*'.

Today, the global community, led by UNESCO, prepares to adopt a new agenda for action beyond 2015-- equitable and quality lifelong learning for all by 2030. There is a clear call to provide quality lifelong learning opportunities for all but there is also a recognition that these opportunities must be more equitable and inclusive. In short, lifelong learning must be more democratic.

My topic today is 'Democratising Lifelong Learning for All: challenges and solutions'. I will take up three challenges and propose the solutions based on some of the work that COL does.

In the last few decades, we have seen several initiatives around the world, to open up access to quality education for large numbers. We saw the rise of open universities, dual mode provision, online learning and now the Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs. Higher education opened up its ivory towers

and let the masses in. And it is true that massification opened up access to newer constituencies but has it democratized education? Democratisation implies not just the multiplication of numbers: it involves equalization of opportunities, opening of access, freedom of choice and a fair chance of success.

We know that democracy means of, by and for the people. This means involving the stakeholders in determining the kinds of actions required. COL develops programmes to address the needs of its diverse stakeholders in different contexts. For example, illiterate women in India have learnt about goat-rearing from experts using their basic mobile phones. They decided that goat-rearing was what they wished to learn and joined COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme. This resulted in improved income for the women and their families. Similarly, a young woman in Kenya learnt construction skills through a blended programme supported by COL and is now able to contribute to her family income and to support her own further training. These examples demonstrate that if we wish to democratize lifelong learning, it is important to i) consult stakeholders and encourage their participation and ii) deliver programmes which address their needs.

The second aspect of democratizing education is to provide access to lifelong learning for all. Open and Distance Learning plus ICTs have the potential to open up access. But ICTs can also widen the disparities between those who have access and those who do not. If we look at the growth of technology in the last decade, we find that most radical growth has been in mobile telephony. If we mean to democratise learning, we need to take into account the technologies that are accessible, affordable and available and to modify our pedagogic approaches to suit particular constituencies and contexts.

MOOCs are often seen by many in developing countries as a possible means of democratizing education. But so far, have MOOCs reached the unreached? According to Sreenivasan, at the moment MOOCs weren't reaching the unreached in Africa but those on Wall Street through a course on Financial Engineering and Risk Management. Other research suggests that so far MOOCs have only reached those with degrees. A recent study conducted by the University of Michigan shows that MOOCs can reach the unreached if the disadvantaged learners are specifically targeted. COL offered a MOOC4D which could be accessed easily through mobile devices. COL offered a modified model of a MOOC which gave materials on CDROM to learners with limited connectivity so that they could use their connected time for tutor and peer interactions. Careful implementation of the MOOC model can democratize education and training.

The third aspect of democratising education is to provide not just access but access to success. COL works with institutions to develop systems to offer quality education and training. COL has developed a Review and Improvement Model (COLRIM), which helps institutions to assess their respective practices as a step towards external accreditation or as an ongoing process of continuous self-improvement. It is a low-cost 'do-it-yourself' model which does not require a panel of external experts but engages internal staff. It involves developing an institutional culture of quality rather than imposing top-down models of quality assurance. The involvement of all stakeholders is critical for creating this culture.

Are our Higher Education Institutions engaging stakeholders to determine what would be quality education and skills required for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? A 2011 study in the US found that half the employers surveyed said they had trouble finding suitable graduates to hire. A McKinsey report points out that 'employers, education providers and youth live in parallel universes' and very often these worlds do not meet. There seems to be a disconnect between what we teach in our schools and universities and what is

required by the job market. There needs to be a consultative and collaborative process which brings all key players together to design need-based and relevant programmes.

In conclusion let me say that if we wish to democratise lifelong learning, we need to make it relevant to the needs of stakeholders; harness appropriate technologies and improve the quality of our teaching and learning to ensure that learners have the skills needed to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

With that let me wish the conference every possible success.