

# Access to Success

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*Remarks by Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning, at the ceremony to launch preparations for the 6th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, Chennai, India, 10 October 2009*

## Transcript

Professor Swaminathan, Professor Pillai, Dr. Kalyani, Secretary Ganesan, Dr. Ramanujam, Dr. Sreedher, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to be back in Chennai and to announce the launching of preparations for the 6th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in the presence of the Chair of our Honorary Academic Advisory Committee, Professor M. N. Swaminathan. Having Professor Swaminathan in this role is extremely appropriate since much of the work of the Commonwealth of Learning, which is organizing the 6th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in partnership with Indira Gandhi National Open University, has been inspired by the work and values of Professor Swaminathan and his Foundation. One of his former colleagues, Dr. Kodhandaraman Balasubramanian is now on our staff at COL and one of our most successful programmes, Lifelong Learning for Farmers, began and succeeded right here in Tamil Nadu.

Professor Swaminathan and his Foundation have always stressed the link between development and learning. This is now COL's motto: Learning for Development, and is the essential focus of the conference that we are announcing today, the 6th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning or PCF6.

As the number implies this will be the sixth in a series of increasingly impactful pan-Commonwealth forums on open learning. The first, PCF1, was held in Brunei in 1999; followed by PCF2 in Durban, South Africa in 2002; PCF3 in Dunedin, New Zealand in 2004; PCF4 in Ocho Rios, Jamaica in 2006 and PCF5 in London last year. Those familiar with the Commonwealth will understand that this means that a Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning has now been held in each of the five Commonwealth regions and we can now start the circuit again.

In each case the Commonwealth of Learning works with a partner in the region: The University of the West Indies in Jamaica; the University of London in London and now the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India. We are most grateful to IGNOU, the world's largest open university with a full range of academic programmes, for agreeing to partner with us. We hope that PCF6 will showcase IGNOU to the world and not only IGNOU, but Indian expertise and experience in distance education more widely.

No country has made a bigger commitment to the use of the technology of open and distance learning in

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education than India. In higher education, as well as IGNOU, you have a dozen state open universities, represented here by the Vice-Chancellor of the Tamil Nadu Open University – a longstanding partner of the Commonwealth of Learning.

But you also have the world's largest open school, the very dynamic National Institute for Open Schooling and ten state open schools. Furthermore India is making a big commitment to the development and use of Open Educational Resources and the development of low-cost technology to promote education and foster learning.

The title we have chosen for PCF6 is *Access and Success in Learning: Global Development Perspectives*. We want to stress the importance of successful learning. We know now that with technology we can take learning to scale. We also know from examples that it is possible to take learning to scale with high quality. What we must do is achieve quality at scale consistently in the most cost-effective manner. That is where the global exchange of experience is invaluable.

The programme of PCF6, which will be developed under the able leadership of Dr Ramanujam, will aim for an integrated blend of themes and sessions, some originating in COL's own programme of work, some in the papers submitted for presentation. This blend should not be difficult to achieve because COL's programme of work for 2009-2012 was developed in the light of Commonwealth needs, contemporary trends, and government priorities – all in a perspective of global development.

Let me mention briefly some of the themes of COL's work that will certainly generate discussion at PCF6. I begin with the challenges facing the formal educational system.

First, open schooling. The key challenge in education today is the 'secondary surge'. As more and more children complete primary school a tidal wave of youngsters will look for secondary schooling and not find it, because conventional approaches alone will not suffice to meet the demand. India will be able to showcase its decades of experience in this area.

Second, teacher education. The world will need 10 million new teachers over the next ten years. Using open and distance learning is the only way to train and retrain the numbers necessary. But we want more than that. We need better curricula for teacher education and we need teachers who are skilled in using the learning technologies that will become ubiquitous during their careers.

In higher education the challenge is to achieve scale with quality. Asia is the right place to address it because Asia is home to most of the world's mega-universities. India itself is grappling with quality issues in a determined way.

Access to success in learning does not only mean formal education. Global development depends on the informal and self-directed learning of billions of people.

Skills development is the bridge between the formal and the non-formal. Technical and vocational education in institutions is fine, but we also need more informal learning that leads directly to improved

livelihoods. In this regard COL has learned much from the work of the Swaminathan Foundation.

The best example is the Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme that I alluded to earlier. It addresses directly the key challenge of rural development and is taking advantage of new technologies such as mobile phones that seem tailor made to promote learning for development. We shall hear a lot about mobile learning at PCF6.

Another lively area of COL's work is about mobilising communities to use their community media to improve health and livelihoods. Here again, India is setting the pace with its commitment to expand dramatically the use of community radio. The challenge is to put 'community' into community radio and community media generally. Many of the delegates to PCF6 will be engaged in that task.

Underlying all this is the revolution being created in all forms of education and training for online learning. Can it be conducted cost-effectively at scale with high quality? That traditional challenge to open and distance learning applies with particular acuity to eLearning.

And will eLearning succeed in releasing the potential of open educational resources. The idea of a global intellectual commons is tremendously attractive and eLearning can help to make it happen. But things do not always happen just because they can happen and it would be nice if they did. Open Educational Resources are sure to be a lively topic of debate.

Finally for now, because I could go on adding to the list, there are the new inexpensive learning technologies that the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, here in India, is putting together under the leadership of Dr. Sreedher. We are now getting close the price point where these technologies can become mass technologies and it is tremendously exciting.

These are just some of the themes that will generate passionate discussions at PCF6. There's a lot to talk about and I am delighted that IGNOU and its partners will be organising a number of pre- and post-conference workshops in different parts of India. This will make the trip to India even more worthwhile for foreign delegates.

The attendance at PCF6 will be very diverse. Even at PCF5 in London a majority of delegates were from developing countries, because that is where cost-effective learning technologies can have the greatest impact. I anticipate that at PCF6 the large majority of delegates will be from those countries. This will give a focus on south-south cooperation and given its rapidly growing ties with Africa, India is the ideal place to reflect on its potential.

Over the years the PCFs have gained a reputation as the most interesting and vital conferences addressing the intersection of development, learning and technology. I am sure that the 6th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning will take that reputation to even greater heights and it is a pleasure to be here to announce it in India today and to announce the selection of the logo for PCF6 after a competition that attracted 120 entries. It is very appropriate that the winner is an MBA student of IGNOU.

I particularly thank Professor Swaminathan for being with us this evening since he is flying off to the USA later tonight. This has been a very happy occasion and I wish you all well as we being the preparations for a most successful conference.