

DEVELOPING THE COMMONWEALTH AS AN EDUCATIONAL NETWORK

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1. INTRODUCTION

I want in this session to present a case study to you. Perhaps it will be a slightly unusual one, in that it is as much about an organisation and how it is reinventing itself for the next century, as it is about a project undertaken by an organisation. For me, for the moment, the organisation is the project. So I want to set our plans for the development of a Commonwealth Resource Centre firmly in the context of our perception of the strengths and potential for the Commonwealth itself into the next century.

2. BACKGROUND: The Commonwealth Institute

The Institute is a well known Commonwealth agency. Founded originally in 1893, at 105 years old it is older than the Commonwealth itself - more than twice as old. It is unique in the network of Commonwealth organisations in being a national organisation (we are officially still an agency of the British Government) devoted entirely to 'promoting and celebrating the Commonwealth', as our mission statement has it; and it has a distinguished record in the field of education and the arts. But history and a record of achievement in the twentieth century do not automatically provide the best recipe for success in the twenty first.

No period in the Institute's long history has been more challenging than the last five years. Faced in 1993 with the prospect of closure through the withdrawal of British Government funding - an embarrassing episode for the Institute but a shameful one for the British Government - the Institute has had to reconceive itself and discover a role through which it can continue to add value in the Commonwealth of tomorrow.

If you will forgive a personal perspective, I came to the Institute in 1997 in the immediate aftermath of this episode; and I am charged with the task of leading it into the next century. I was encouraged by the board of Governors to take the nearest thing to a clean sheet of paper to this task, and I was therefore able to begin my assignment by undertaking a strategic review of the opportunities for the Institute, which led to the publication of a new five year strategic plan last year. We called it *Commonwealth 21* to signal our vision into the next century. Coming from outside the world of international and Commonwealth affairs I also had the brief luxury of a honeymoon during which I could ask naive questions and get away with it.

3. OUR Vision of the Twenty First Century

Coming from the world of organisations which support families and the relationships within them, I was particularly interested in how relationships in the Commonwealth operated in practice. I was amazed at what I found, and it is highly relevant to our interests this week in the field of open learning.

The Commonwealth today is an unique global network of governments, organisations and communities in 54 countries. Its structures are loose yet the networks which operate within it are widespread and complex. It is as a network that the Commonwealth operates best. In a world where formal structures are giving way to more fluid relationships economically, politically and socially, this is a huge asset.

What is more, in a world which is increasingly grouping itself into regional blocs for the development of economic strength and competitiveness, the Commonwealth becomes ever more distinctive in its central characteristics: a network spanning the globe, linking fundamentally different cultures through the instruments of common language, legal and educational systems and - though this should not be exaggerated, particularly by an Englishman - close bonds formed through historical associations.

These are fantastic strengths. Yet, being under-recognised, they are also under-used and under-valued. As the Commonwealth re-emerges, in Britain and elsewhere, as a significant and unique global enterprise, it must build on its strengths.

My colleagues and I were, then, faced with the question: how could the Institute contribute to developing these strengths? We were clear that tomorrow's world of networks will need its own new structures. When markets are global and communications technology has no respect for national boundaries, the key to those networks will be access to relevant knowledge, information and resources through well sign-posted entry points offering high quality services.

Over the years the Institute has developed core competencies as:

- a source of knowledge and information about the contemporary Commonwealth;
- a supplier of education resource materials and training, primarily directed towards children of school age and their teachers. Its most recent educational resource was a four part pack on the Commonwealth for schools - mainly in Britain - which was published to coincide with the Edinburgh CHOGM;
- a multi-cultural centre in Britain for both the visual and performing arts, which holds and exhibits collections of contemporary Commonwealth artefacts;
- more recently, a conference and events centre which is now an award winner in its field. The Centre is now the institute's main source of revenue and, as such, a vital facility underpinning our development.

The challenge we faced was how to exert maximum leverage for change and development in clearly identified, focused fields of opportunity. We were clear that we would do this best by building both on the strengths of the Commonwealth and on our own competencies in developing our programmes; and also that we would succeed best if we were to work in partnership with others who shared our vision for the Commonwealth and avoided sectors already well served by others. Saying no is sometimes harder than saying yes. I shall return to the question of partnerships later.

4. THE INSTITUTE'S Strategy in Outline

With this perception of the Commonwealth, and of our own place in it, in our minds, my colleagues and I became quite clear that the centrepiece of the Institute's strategy should be to develop our role as a focal point for the Commonwealth: physically accessible in the heart of London where we would locate an international resource centre and run educational, business, cultural and public affairs programmes; virtually accessible on the world wide web giving well structured entry to resources and knowledge on the Commonwealth.

There is a summary of the strategy we developed as an appendix to this paper; and in developing it we identified our principal target audiences as follows:

- the education sector, particularly school teachers and advisors, primary and secondary pupils and students;
- the business community, particularly companies seeking trade and investment opportunities in the Commonwealth;
- individuals and families with an interest in life-long learning, particularly in relation to contemporary Commonwealth and international culture and arts;
- Britain's minority ethnic communities, particularly those with Commonwealth connections;
- opinion formers, influencers and researchers;
- organisations seeking a venue for conferences and events.

More particularly, we would build on our track record as a supplier of educational resources for schools, teachers and students, and explore the scope for using the new technologies to establish the Institute as a leading resource to them in the next century. The concept of an international resource centre focusing on the contemporary Commonwealth arose directly from this, and it is this role which I want to develop in the remainder of this paper.

5. A RESOURCE Centre for the Commonwealth

The Institute occupies a dramatic modern building in the heart of London. It gives us an unique opportunity to combine the physical and the virtual, offering a special flexibility in reaching our key audiences in a highly accessible way - offering them a wide variety of media through which they can choose not only to learn about

the contemporary Commonwealth, but to use it as a vital and dynamic network. We mean to make the most of the physical as well as the virtual, and we do not intend to ignore the principle that, for many, the new technologies offer an additional medium but not a substitute for a physically accessible environment in which they can explore, touch, feel and even smell.

But we are also aware that the new information revolution based on the converging technologies of computing, satellite and cable sets the challenge that moves through access to information, the gathering of knowledge, and sustaining interactive learning. It gives millions of students the ability to access a vast network of learning resources without restriction of geography, opening times, or fixed focus. It has become a truism that connectivity to this learning base will be critical to success in the knowledge society of the next century - the classroom, the library and the exhibition gallery are no longer enough. We regard it as our job to open up access for learners across the Commonwealth, to open doors for them.

This technology is a gift for a network as diverse yet as strong as the Commonwealth; and the Commonwealth should be a gift for open learning. The challenges in connectivity, supply and training are massive. But the opportunity to create a network of learning for schools, their teachers and young people throughout the Commonwealth is, I believe, as important as anything the organisation now faces. No other facility I know of could equip tomorrow's generation with more powerful a global framework or more rich a perspective for their learning.

Others will tackle the enormous challenges of connectivity and supply. At the Institute we are of course interested in those challenges but we do not see ourselves as experts or leaders in that field. We are, however, keenly interested in the development of learning content on the internet, and in the skilling of teachers and their students in the use of this technology.

(We are also working on one other major on-line project, a subscriber based database and information service to companies interested in trade and investment opportunities in the Commonwealth. CIBIS, the Commonwealth Institute Business Information Service, will exploit the potential of the internet with the private sector, and we shall develop the technology platform at a level which will support the full potential of both these projects as they grow; but that is a subject for another paper.)

But let me return briefly to the physical arrangement of our galleries in London, because we have taken our model for the resource centre from the layout of the galleries. We intend to develop a network of multi-media resource points based on each member nation of the Commonwealth (or, in the case of very small states, on each group of nations). We shall develop a specification for each resource point so as to provide access to the most relevant and current knowledge and data on each country, and so that this can become a resource within the country concerned as well as more widely.

A typical resource point in the Commonwealth Galleries will centre on access to the Institute's website providing a detailed country profile, updated regularly; but it will also contain:

- access to country and subject information also through CD-ROM terminals;
- books and journals;
- videos, CDs, CD-ROMs and cassettes;
- press cuttings and conference reports;
- a display of posters/wall-charts/maps and wall-hangings;
- artefacts from the Institute's collection or on loan.

In addition to these resource points, the galleries will house special sound insulated areas which will cater for quieter study and research or for groups of students undertaking project work; and seminar rooms will continue to be available for training purposes.

The first resource point is taking shape as the first months of 1999 unfold. Featuring South Africa in the run up to the 1999 CHOGM, it will include all these elements and be unveiled in February 1999 at an event in the presence of the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh. Two years of concept development will have become reality!

If this physical layout provides a model for the virtual, the scope for developing internet content is limited only by imagination and the funding to support capacity development. These are early days for us, and we are keen to draw on the imaginations of others, but some but some of the principal subject areas we have already identified for each country profile include:

- the environment;
- geography;
- literature and language;
- material culture;
- design and technology;
- the arts;
- current affairs;
- religions;
- tourism and travel;
- trade and economics.

While in Britain we shall be developing in the context of the national curriculum and the new National Grid for Learning being developed by Government, we shall also explore equivalent public and private sector developments as we extend the facility across each country in turn.

The challenge for the resource centre will be both to develop its own new content with Commonwealth governments and other partners, and also to identify the best of content being developed by others and harness access to it, if necessary under license, through the Institute's portal website. Through a combination of these twin strategies the Commonwealth Resource Centre can become an unique educational facility.

We know that establishing a limited number of strategic partnerships will be key to our success. The Institute will not achieve its full potential if it tries to go it alone. Indeed I believe that, if the Commonwealth is to make the most of its strengths, we must all break away from the idea of single institutions. So the Institute is combining its capability with the potential and powers of others: partners and stakeholders with whom we have a common interest in the private and public sectors. This is what will give us together, an unique and valuable product. We are not afraid to confront the question 'what is in it for us and what is in it for you?' That is the basic foundation of successful partnership and, if we do not answer those questions, partnerships will always falter. So, if you feel there may be the basis of a partnership between your organisation and the Institute in this project I should be delighted to hear from you.

6. CONCLUSION

We have set ourselves an ambitious challenge in developing the Commonwealth Resource Centre; but I believe it is a vital link in shaping the Commonwealth of the next century. We shall know that we are winning when important conferences like this one lead into strong working alliances; and when educationists the world over turn to the Commonwealth and its key agencies to set the pace in applying the new technologies in the cause of learning and global awareness.

APPENDIX: THE INSTITUTE'S STRATEGY IN OUTLINE

This strategy is based on six main programmes:

- A. Establish the Institute as a showcase centre on the Commonwealth
- B. Develop an international resource centre
- C. Develop a business information service
- D. Establish the Institute as a leading resource to schools
- E. Raise the profile of the Commonwealth and the Institute
- F. Maximise revenue from the Conference and Events Centre

In implementing the strategy, the Institute will also:

- G. Generate sufficient income to sustain growth and development;
- H. Invest in the management and development of people as our main asset;
- J. Maintain the highest standards of financial management;
- K. Establish quantity, quality and financial targets, and constantly evaluate the effectiveness of services;
- L. Take full advantage of developments in information and communications technology;
- M. Restore our unique buildings and maintain them in a good state of repair.

The plan will be achieved in two phases. In phase one, 1998-2000, we shall focus on developing the Institute's role as an international resource centre on the Commonwealth, serving the business and education sectors and raising the Institute's profile and that of the Commonwealth. We shall also generate revenue and develop key business partnerships, while the galleries are refurbished.

In phase two, 2000-03, we shall relaunch the Institute's Kensington Centre, fully refurbished, and develop it as a showcase centre on the Commonwealth.