The first day of the Eighth Pan-Commonwealth Forum saw the best minds in open and distance learning gather in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 27 November 2016. The first day of the four-day conference started at the Inaugural Session, with Professor Dato’ Dr Mansor Fadzil, President and Vice Chancellor of the Open University of Malaysia, welcoming everyone to the conference and Malaysia. The Commonwealth of Learning’s Chair Dr Linda Sissons, Professor Dr Asha Kanwar, President and CEO of COL, and Tan Sri Emeritus Professor Dr Gajaraj Dhanarajan, former President and CEO of COL, all spoke to the crowd of attendees.

Professor Kanwar spoke about the link between learning and sustainable development, saying that “Sustainable Development Goal 4, which focuses on education, aspires to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030.” She asked: “But can we achieve these targets? If we review the global situation today, we find that there are still 263 million children and young people out of school, over 750 million adults are illiterate and 71 million or 13 per cent of the youth are unemployed. In addition, 15 per cent of the world’s population experience some forms of disability.” Prof Kanwar explained that it is important for participants at PCF8 to not lose sight of the bigger picture that is illustrated by these statistics.

Referring to the continued unequitable access to education, Professor Dhanarajan said “It is becoming essential, that in order to move toward a more equitable provision, much more imaginative policies and practices have to be designed to bring these others into the catchment. I therefore ask those of you here if it is time for a new kind of openness within the Commonwealth and among the Commonwealth nations? Is it time to move from the old comfort zones to the new zones of challenge that is now?”

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The Kuala Lumpur Declaration will capture the ideas, suggestions and discussions of participants of the Eighth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, and distill them into key recommendations that can be taken forward. The draft Declaration will be shared online via the COL website and social media on 29 November 2016. Participants will be invited to respond either through Facebook or by email at KLdeclaration@col.org.

In the first Asa Briggs lecture since the death of Lord Asa Briggs earlier this year, Sir John Daniel gave a touching and inspiring lecture. The theme of the talk further honoured Lord Briggs, said Sir Daniel: “Asa used to say that one of his life’s goals was to re-draw the map of learning. I adopt this goal as my title today: Re-drawing the Map of Learning.”

Following Lord Briggs’s life from student, to soldier, to teacher and scholar, to vice-chancellor and chancellor, Sir Daniel reflected on Lord Briggs’s contributions to open and distance learning, saying “His openness to people, places, methods and ideas should inspire us all. Today, in too many places, the trend is to close, not to open. We should treasure the memory of Lord Asa Briggs and follow his example.”

Meeting for Session Chairs and Rapporteurs

Registration underway, the Session Chairs and Rapporteurs met to go over their role in the coming days. From Keynote Speeches to the many Parallel Sessions, more than 60 people will be guiding and reporting on the Forum proceedings.
The PCF8 Plenary Session delved into the Forum’s main theme of “Open, Online and Flexible Learning: The Key to Sustainable Development”. Chaired by Professor Paul Prinsloo, ODL Research Professor at the University of South Africa, the session included three panelists: Professor Belinda Tynan, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) and Vice-President of RMIT University; Professor Elifas T Bisanda, Vice-Chancellor of Open University of Tanzania; and Dr Indrajit Banerjee, Director of UNESCO’s Knowledge Societies Division, Communication and Information Sector.

While the panel discussed a number of areas related to the theme, the topic of accessibility, particularly in relation to people with disabilities, proved a key focus. This was further related to the earlier talk by Professor Dhanarajan and his call to reconsider the definition of openness. Professor Prinsloo said “I think this is one of the aha moments in this engagement. Yes, we are open to people, but only to some people, and we’re not quite as open as we think we are.”

**DID YOU KNOW?**

**Connections: COL’s Newsletter**

COL’s Connections newsletter is published three times a year. It covers COL activities around the Commonwealth and includes contributions from partners and experts in open and distance learning, sustainable development and much more. Email communications@col.org to be added to the email list and be alerted as soon as the next issue is published.

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**Live streaming available**

A number of the talks and special events are being live streamed via YouTube. Many are then being saved and archived. You can follow and/or re-watch on Open University Malaysia’s YouTube channel at: https://www.youtube.com/user/OUMportal

**Watch the Plenary Session on YouTube:**
https://youtu.be/62GdtS2eUV4
Launch of COL Publications

COL publishes books, reports, how-to guides, course materials and the like, as part of its efforts to promote and develop distance education and open learning, and help developing nations improve access to quality education and training. In the early evening off the first day of PCF8, COL held its Publications Launch event, where it officially launched 20 publications. Topics ranged from teacher education in Sub-Saharan Africa to ensuring quality in MOOCs to gender mainstreaming.

John Lesperance, COL Education Specialist for VUSSC spoke about the revised Transnational Qualifications Framework.

What’s ahead

- Keynote Address by Mr Martin Bean CBE
- Opening Ceremony with YB Dato’ Seri Idris Jusoh, Minister of Higher Education, Malaysia
- Keynote Address by Prof Dato’ Dr Mansor Fadzil
- COL Honorary Fellows Presentation

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