

# *Education and Training in Economic Development*

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## Transcript

Recently, during a visit to a primary school in Male, The Maldives, a poster on the library wall caught my eye:

"One who reads and writes never has to ask for bread"

This caused me to ponder what I have always regarded as axiomatic (no doubt the product of a Scottish heritage) - education, if not an ultimate guarantee of progress, can certainly make life better. And, like the twin-headed Janus of classical mythology, it can do so in two ways. Education, as an end in itself, can add to personal fulfillment, but it also provides the tools for a more productive life. The key, of course, is access to knowledge and knowledge has always been the principal ingredient in human progress. The all too frequent blandishments that we now live in a knowledge society and economy does a disservice to all previous ages since the invention of the wheel, but we know what is meant. Even more than land, natural resources and capital, knowledge will determine who wins the world's race. Thus, education and training are the jet engines of economic development.

Along the way, it is useful to ask what we mean by economic development. Economists of the past have much to answer for in their narrow and often myopic definition of what constitutes the Gross National Product. Goods and services included in the definition are those respondent to Western style values which too readily ignore the cultural identity and indigenous desires of the developing world. There is an increasing danger that globalization will exacerbate that tendency by delivering homogenized products to much of the world. Moreover, the conventional definition of GNP contains two huge omissions. First, most of the public services - education and health care, for example - do not find their way into the definition and yet they are essential ingredients in development. Second, the GNP is like a balance sheet that records only assets and not liabilities. None of the social costs such as resource depletion or environmental degradation are included. However, those are questions for another day. In any event, only the broadened application of education will permit us to change the thinking about those matters. Meanwhile, the issue for today is how to widen access to education and training, and that is the mandate

of the Commonwealth of Learning.

As we proceed into the new millennium, over one billion people are lacking the literacy necessary to sign their name or to read a book. Among them are over 140 million children who do not have access to primary education: a large proportion of those denied education are girls and women. Of the children with access to primary education, a large percentage of those who find themselves in the poorest countries of the world will be in crowded classrooms that are in a very bad state of repair and some will be in situations where there may not be any classrooms at all. Many will be taught by untrained or poorly trained teachers, located in ill-equipped schools with no learning materials, laboratories, libraries or connections to the outside world. Moreover, a good proportion of these children will not complete their primary school education. Most of these un- or under-provided learners are living in Commonwealth member states located in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. These countries will also suffer educational deprivation at other levels on the educational ladder.

These young people, along with the billion other adults who never received nor benefited from education when they were young, will find themselves attempting to function in a global environment where:

- long-term job success necessitates a focus on continuous learning regardless of profession, geographic location or age;
- developing a strong human resource base is essential for economic and social development;
- training and the upgrading of skills and knowledge are necessary to improve the productive capacity of the labour force;
- relevant education and training has been accepted as potential solutions to address key issues such as environment degradation, burgeoning population, and domestic violence; and,
- the impact of technology and increased levels of education on governance issues are being recognized, assessed and appreciated.

It is under these circumstances that the design and delivery of education is being considered by nations rich and poor. A consensus is beginning to emerge that opportunities for and provisions of life-long learning will require a reconsideration of the ways in which the educational environment is constructed, organized, structured, governed and financed.

Distance education, therefore, is being incorporated into mainstream education and training efforts; it is reshaping the new educational landscape, including to whom and how education is delivered. Educational designs are being developed as rapid increases in technology continue to collapse spatial boundaries, and Commonwealth countries continue to lead the world in the imaginative ways in which they have applied distance and open learning. However, that capability is neither distributed equally among all Commonwealth countries nor in all sectors of education in those countries where open and distance learning has found success in one form or another.

The Commonwealth of Learning can take pride in the fact that, over a period of eleven years of work in

and for the Commonwealth, it has not only brought attention to the opportunities presented by open and distance learning but also trained people, built partnerships, developed models and provided expanding capabilities among nations of the Commonwealth in the application of open and distance learning.

Unfortunately, much remains to be done especially since the arrival of the new technologies that are reshaping the ways in which the world operates. In all regions of the Commonwealth, there is an acknowledged need to sensitize stakeholders to the variety of new learning technologies applicable to the delivery of quality education. There is also increasing demand for the use of open and distance learning methodologies to address a number of capacity building issues. These include the extension of literacy and numeracy skills among millions of adults through the use of radio, television and telematics, helping rural women to develop entrepreneurial skills, assisting agricultural extension workers to improve their capacity to educate farm workers, the training of legislators in legislative drafting, increasing the speed of in service training of un- or under-trained teachers, and delivering continuous professional development programmes for health workers, managers and administrators.

The last five years has seen a phenomenal increase in the application of new technologies to the learning environment. This development is removing the distinction between conventional and distance learning. It is also eroding political and geographical barriers to the movement of knowledge. While many view this as a good thing others fear the possibility of a new form of imperialism underlying these developments. This imperialism has all the potential to undermine a nation's intellectual and cultural assets in the longer term. Although we must always be mindful of those risks, a lot can be done to increase the national capability to exploit the new technologies, to increase local competitiveness, and to enhance local capacities to create and deliver learning and cultural products to the people.

To achieve this, skills must be developed to use the technologies in the learning environment, content has to be produced in sufficient quantity and quality, information technology connectivity has to be improved, appliances have to be made available at affordable costs, appropriate uses for the technologies have to be identified, and policy frameworks need to be established to support these ventures. The Commonwealth experience in all of these areas can be put to use for the Commonwealth at large, and that is COL's principal mission now.

There can surely be no doubt that we will make substantial inroads on the issue of access over the next twenty-five years. And there is no doubt - both in developed and developing countries - that E-Learning will accelerate exponentially and may well become the most significant educational tool yet developed. But, the world of globalization has been one where the rich have become richer while the developing world struggles to gain a share of the world's wealth. Thus, will E-Learning widen the gap between individuals and nations more than access help to close it; that is to say, will the social divide become wider? There is a huge inherent danger that this will be so.

To minimize the impact toward social divide and maximize the prospect of social good, we must make a profound effort in certain directions, in particular:

- Developing policies that support our concern for equity and equality of access, including telecommunication regulations, tariffs, and telecommunication infrastructure, and creating policy

guidelines to ensure that those delivering such services make appropriate provision (such as free supply of appliances, connections, etc.) for marginalized groups in order for them to share in the benefits.

- Investing in people even faster than investing in technology. What good is a digital environment if the key players do not have the skills to use its potential effectively? Unfortunately, too few institutions are investing sufficient resources to train online teachers. Only with constant scrutiny can we shape our future to ensure that distance education and open learning, particularly E-Learning, promote not only economic development but social good rather than further social divide.

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