

# Closing Remarks: PCF8

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Dr Linda Sissons, Prof Ramli Bahroom, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen. We have come to the close of a very successful eighth Pan Commonwealth Forum. And the success is due to the contributions of each and every member of the PCF community, that has emerged over the years—with newcomers and familiar faces. Thank you all. My task today is a challenging one—to sum up the rich discussions at the keynotes, parallel and poster sessions, round tables, and all the intense engagements in between—in fifteen minutes. So let us look at the takeaways and prospects, which I have prepared with Team COL.

I think you will agree that we are much clearer today about our theme of how ‘open online and flexible learning can best lead to sustainable development’ than we were four days ago, so that is already an important takeaway. Many ideas have emerged, and exciting prospects mapped out

It has been a very intense week because before PCF 8, we had eight preconference events. These three very popular workshops were held at the OUM Campus.

Five other workshops were held for COL programme-related activities with our partners from the field.

PCF8 got off to a flying start with the thought provoking speech by our former President Tan Sri Raj Dhanarajan. He stressed the need for openness and challenged us with the question “to what extent has open education resisted and challenged mainstream education in bringing about change?” he exhorted us to take charge to bring about change and transformation.

In his inspiring and beautifully Briggs lecture dedicated to the memory of one of COL’s founders, Sir John Daniel, also a former President of COL, took us through the illustrious life and career of Lord Asa Briggs of Lewes. He stressed how Asa Briggs followed the principles of being open to people, open to places, open to methods, and open to ideas throughout his life. In these days when the tendency is to close rather than to open, Asa Briggs inspires us to uphold the value of openness.

Professor Paul Prinsloo led a lively discussion with our three eminent panellist, Prof. Belinda Tynnan, Prof. Elifas Bisanda, and Dr. Indrajit Banerjee. The key headlines that emerged from this panel were that learner should be at the front and centre of all our care and efforts, especially those with disabilities. Another message was that let regulations not close down our system, but let open remain truly open. And finally, going forward let’s leave no one behind.

We are very grateful to Dato’ Seri Idris Jusoh, Minister of Higher Education for finding the time to be with us. He is a visionary who is leading a major transformation of higher education in Malaysia. He reminded us that “education is getting to be more authentic, there is greater choice, pedagogy has changed, we call it heutagogy now a days, where you can determine what you want to learn, rather than

being told what to learn, what to read and what to do”. Is the ODL community ready for heutagogy and what roles will it have in lifelong learning?

The keynote for the first sub-theme on Technology and Innovation was delivered by Mr Martin Bean, who represents Australia on COL’s Board of Governors. He is an innovator, who thinks about the future of technology and education. He spoke of how learners will make 15 career changes in their lives, which means they will have to take responsibility of their own education, to gain qualifications both formally and informally, deposit them in portfolios with digital badges. 2016 is the year of the micro-credentials. Is the ODL community ready for this innovation? Are we ready to teach for the jobs of the future?

Recommendations from this sub-theme include the following: that technology must lead to more access and more flexibility. We will need to harness the potential of mobile devices and instead of throwing out traditional technologies, optimise their benefits. This will require a lot of change in our existing system, therefore we need leadership that will be able to guide us through this change.

Our host Dato’ Prof. Mansor Fadzil, addressed the second sub-theme of quality and equity in learning. His key message was “quality comes from quality people... Good quality people will determine good quality institutions”. He said that a focus on quality can lead to equity.

There were rich and fiery discussions around this sub-theme. But, let me share four recommendations. Participants stressed that quality can’t be elite and exclusive, but must also promote equity. There was emphasis on paying greater attention to learning styles within the context of lifelong learning. We are happy that there is a greater focus on research, and use technology to support learner support.

Dr. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka inspired us all with her steering speech on Access and Inclusion. She noted that in countries where child marriage is rife, we need creative ways to target those girls who through education can prevent or escape these unions. Open and targeted online and offline education could be important as an intervening mechanism. Do we have targeted approaches to promote gender equality and empowerment?

The papers presented under this sub-theme covered both the formal and non-formal sectors. Some of the recommendations include, one, ODL must address the issues of disabilities; two, we need a targeted approach to gender inclusion; and three, technology must bridge rather than widen the knowledge divide.

David Wiley spoke on the theme of efficiency and effectiveness, and shared his research on how OER can increase performance and decrease costs. Data shows that the use of OER decreased the cost of textbooks by 94% and increased the course throughput rate by 6 points. He also clarified that one size does not fit all, and the use of OER will be different in different contexts.

Some of the conclusions as we go forward are: the need to align institutional policies with national policies and SDGs. Most participants felt that adoption/adaptation of OER should be promoted. The continuous professional development of teachers will lead to better efficiencies and effectiveness. But, in order to measure outcomes and impact, robust M&E systems are required.

The market exchange, with 28 visiting points, was a vibrant, dynamic, colourful and loud place. Most delegates enjoyed the opportunity to engage with other members of the community. This gave participants the opportunity not just to see and hear about the amazing initiatives to support sustainable development all over the Commonwealth, but also provided a platform to establish new networks and strengthen existing ones.

So, at the close of PCF 8, let us reflect on what is different this time and how the world has changed from when we met in Abuja three years ago. At that time, we were coming to the close of the MDGs. Last year,

the international community adopted the SDGs which will guide the education and development agenda for the next fifteen years. Learning analytics and big data, which were then relatively unknown have now become a real possibility for improving the quality of teaching and learning. Micro-credentials which were unknown then have now become a reality. We are now focusing much more on lifelong learning than three years ago.

What are some of the hens that did not cluck or the birds which did not tweet? One, we did not hear much about answers and concrete solutions to specific challenges. We are still asking questions and focusing on challenges; two, there was little mention of environmental sustainability; and three, the convergence between ODL and campus based institutions is blurring the boundaries, what will be the niche of ODL providers?

As we go forward, one of the key outcomes of this forum is the KL Declaration which gives us a set of recommendations that we must consider implementing. The future will also require a stronger public-private partnership. And finally, ODL can be a viable means of helping accelerate progress towards achieving sustainable development. As a community, let us become effective advocates for promoting open, online and flexible learning for increased access, improved quality, better equity, and lower costs in education and training.

One of the highlights of this PCF was a roundtable of ministers of education and senior officials. Their deliberations and guidance have helped shape the KL declaration which articulate the ‘future we want’.

We have enjoyed the warmth and generous hospitality of our Malaysian partners, and we are very grateful to the Ministry of Higher Education, the Malaysian people. Thank you Malaysia. I would like to thank particularly the many nameless Malaysians, including the staff of the KLCC who have helped us at every step of the way.

Thank you dear participants for travelling all the way to Kuala Lumpur and for your engagement throughout the deliberations. The PCFs are special because of you.

Thank you Dato’ Mansor for being such an understanding and generous host. We appreciate the opportunity that we had to work with Prof. Ramli, Prof. Sahree Datin Teh, Ms May Yeong. Please give a big round of applause to Prof. Mansor, Ramli and Team OUM.

Let me also acknowledge the generous contributions made by our international sponsors and partners, The Open University, UK, the University of London, the National Open University of Nigeria, National Institute of Open Schooling, India, Association of Commonwealth Universities, and our sister organisation, the Commonwealth Foundation.

The COL family in Metro Vancouver and in New Delhi wishes you season’s greetings. Travel back safely and have very happy holidays.

But before we do that, let’s give a standing ovation to the outstanding COL Fellows and the winners of the EDEA awards!