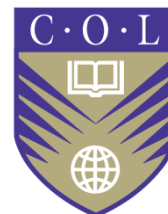


# *My Tip of the Iceberg*

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*5<sup>th</sup> Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning*

*Closing Keynote Address*

*Sir John Daniel  
Commonwealth of Learning*

## **Introduction**

Colleagues:

It is a privilege, as well as a huge challenge, to try to summarise the discussions of the last four days.

We have enjoyed an incredibly rich programme. My first tribute must be to our programme chair, Roger Mills, who personally read every paper submitted and with the help of the theme leaders put together such a diverse and stimulating programme.

Roger has been backed by an amazing team from the University of London. They also have worked very hard for us, so hard that I was worried when I saw a demonstration about working conditions outside the building yesterday that they might have rebelled against all the 15-hour days that they have put in - but they are far too conscientious for that. I thank them on your behalf.

The programme has been so rich and extensive that each one of us could only experience a small part of it. We each saw our own tip of the iceberg. All I can do in this short address is to give my view of the tip of the iceberg. That is risky because your highlights of the conference may be different from mine, so I hope, as the saying goes, that I don't open a can of worms with the tip of my iceberg.

## **Who is here?**

Let me start with the easy part - some statistics about the conference. This has been by far the biggest Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning.

Some 729 people have registered and they come from 70 countries. Since there are only 53 countries in the Commonwealth I suppose we should call this the Pan-Commonwealth Forum ++. The eight countries with the highest attendance have been, in order: India (with exactly 100 delegates); the UK; Nigeria; Canada (that's excluding non-Canadian COL staff); Uganda; South Africa; Kenya and Malaysia.

You will agree that the very strong presence from India augurs well for PCF6 and we look forward to being in India in 2010. By putting the focus on learning for development we have attracted a very diverse participation, most of whom are not from the tertiary sector.

But despite the tremendous diversity of the participants I have been surprised by how many people share the same name. In particular, I had no idea that Forum Gala was such a common name across the Commonwealth.

## Celebrating with the University of London

But I must be more serious. It has been a tremendous privilege, through PCF5, for us to share in the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the University of London's External Studies Programme.

Please explore the wonderful book about *The People's University* that Sir Graeme gave to you on Monday. It is an inspiring account of how one institution has opened up learning. It tells us how, in creating its External Studies Programme one hundred and fifty years ago, the University wanted to reach the 'shoemaker in his garret'. Even though we all have different icons for the people we are trying to reach, we are each, in our own way, trying to open up the possibility of learning to all people.

We are inspired by the University of London External Programme. The five Nobel prize-winners among its alumni is proof that quality achievement and learning at a distance are entirely compatible.

## The Programme

On the first evening Roger Mills explained to us that the Forum programme "addressed the core elements of the COL three-year plan, which in turn is linked to the Millennium Development Goals. It moved away from papers which described process to those which provide evidence of how ODL has been used and whether or not it has been successful in a particular context."

We were led into the programme by three excellent speeches at the Opening Ceremony. Speaking for President Musaveni the Prime Minister of Uganda stressed the need to harness both formal and informal education to development and, in a recurring theme of the conference noted that he was talking about "the development of the individual and also the development of communities". He also reminded us that "we need to learn from informal education structures so as to address some of the weaknesses in the predominant formal education sector".

Following him the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Kamallesh Sharma, urged that "our primary focus be on those who will inherit and inhabit this century, and those who will have to deal with the legacy - often the wretched legacy - of what people of my age have left behind them." He added:

"I believe strongly in young people. The effects of globalisation, positive and negative, flow above all through young people. If today's challenges are to be met, it is by them, and if any enlightened knowledge society is to be created, it will be created through them."

Completing this opening session the Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO, Nick Burnett, reminded us that our aim must be quality learning for development and gave us figures about both the progress and the lack of progress in achieving expanding education. He stressed the extensive interrelationships between education and global trends and urged that our goal must remain Education for All.

On Tuesday morning we were privileged to hear the Briggs Lecture by Professor Brenda Gourley in the presence of Lord Briggs himself. She began by remarking that "we live in a century of extremes - extraordinary extremes" and held out the hope that technology might help us narrow the gap between those extremes.

She evoked the importance of mobile phones and open education resources and suggested how the various Web2 technologies can help us to "leverage what is happening in cyberspace, leverage this gift culture and mobilise people's natural propensity to connect, collaborate, volunteer their time and engage in both teaching and learning activities."

Later that day Carol Bellamy launched one of the four themes of PCF5, *Children and Young People*, with her keynote address on *The Role of Open and Distance Education in Providing Access to Learning for Children and Young People*. She told us that in spite of the tremendous developments in technology, "quality education remains elusive" and that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) provides tremendous opportunities for marginalized communities, even in the developing world.

Fifteen sessions were held under the theme of Children and Young People. There were many recommendations. Some were: to ensure that appropriate technologies are used; to take advantage of public-private partnerships; to develop Vocational Education and Training; to exploit the potential of Open Educational Resources and to explore possibilities of South-North collaboration, especially in open schooling, where the North can learn from practice in the South.

One of the traditions of these Pan-Commonwealth Forums is the conferring of the title of Honorary Fellow of the Commonwealth of Learning on persons who have made particularly distinguished contributions to the development of open and distance learning. I am sure you will all agree that this year's ceremony was particularly special and I ask you to show your appreciation once again for those COL has honoured in this way.

Perhaps the most important key to development is to help the billions of young and not so young people around the world secure livelihoods that can support them. This was an important theme of the conference.

The twenty sessions on livelihoods generated many examples of good practice. Some of the key recommendations were: that access to finance (e.g. micro-credit) is a crucial element in improving livelihoods; that we should focus on community learning as much as on individuals; that in this context we must find ways to scale up the creation of the 'social learning capital' that makes communities pull together to increase their incomes; and that one way to do this is to work with existing self-help groups.

The additional theme of appropriate learning technologies was never far from the surface in much of our discussion and Astrid Dufborg, in her keynote, helped us to question some of our assumptions. Do we want one laptop per child, or one laptop per teacher, or one mobile per child? In looking at these questions she stressed the absolute importance of taking teachers with you. She stressed that technology is there to empower the teachers, not to make them redundant, although of course we were also reminded of the 'hole-in-the-wall' project, in which children learn autonomously.

The technology that attracted most attention throughout the conference was Open Educational Resources, which we can think of as a sort of academic putty that allows us to create learning materials collaboratively and then shape them to our own institutional or individual needs. You saw applications for OERs in every area of learning and it will be particularly interesting to pick up this story at PCF6.

OERs raise important questions of intellectual property and the degree of openness that best suits users and providers. Sessions on copyright attracted a capacity attendance, where we learned that there is no clarity yet about some of the details of the Creative Commons licenses that many institutions are being encouraged to use for Open Education Resources. A clarification document on "no derivatives" and "non-commercial" uses of materials was created and published at the Forum. Creative Commons has embarked on a process to clarify the meanings of terms used in their licenses. If successful, this will reduce the danger of "license pollution", avoiding the situation where institutions and other content provider organisations develop their own licences.

We celebrated the successful use of OERs in making one of COL's EDEA awards to the Open University's OpenLearn website. Let us give all the award winners another round of applause.

Another initiative that is closely bound up with OERs is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. Thanks to the meeting of VUSSC interlocutors that took place before PCF5 I believe that the VUSSC has now reached the long-awaited tipping point. The 29 participating countries have taken charge of the project, seeking COL's help as needed, rather than the other way around. I found the presentation of VUSSC at this forum yesterday by the VUSSC representatives particularly impressive.

Another OER project that attracted a lot of attention was WikiEducator, which is the heart of a collaborative community that has, I suspect, attracted many more adherents at this conference.

Finally, perhaps the most successful of all the OER projects we have heard about is TESSA, the consortium of mainly African institutions that are using OERs to empower teachers and change pedagogy in countries all over Africa.

One of the main themes of the conference was health and it was given a dynamic start by Lidia Brito, who told us that current approaches to stemming the HIV/AIDS pandemic are not working, at least in her country of Mozambique.

She drew particular attention to the challenge of helping AIDS orphans find a valued role in their communities. A child who has to be the head of a household at the age of 12 or 14 has great needs, and the world of open and distance learning needs to rally itself to provide self-instructional materials to help this large and growing number of people.

We had ten sessions on health and some of the key conclusions were: that we must use a more holistic and culture-centred approach; that we must raise community awareness and discussion of values; that we must work with teachers and traditional healers; that simple technology works best; and that ODL and OERs have great potential.

Governance is a new area for COL and for discussions at these Pan-Commonwealth forums, but the 12 sessions devoted to this topic showed that there is an important agenda to be taken forward. Among the conclusions about the role of ODL in Governance are: the importance of peer learning to overcome the gaps between connected individuals; the need to link with local culture and so bring together modern and traditional modes of governance; and to create an online forum so that those who met here can maintain contact.

You will agree that we have had an outstanding array of keynote speakers. The series achieved a wonderful finale with Professor Barney Pityana's address this morning which is still ringing in our ears. He brought it all together by reviewing the promise of open and distance learning in Africa after a decade of development and education. He spoke candidly about the shortcomings of ODL in Africa, noting the chequered history of the African Virtual University and treating his own UNISA as a case study.

However, despite all the problems he noted that ODL is a testament to the demise of exclusivity in education.

Although our four main themes talked about development outcomes there was naturally much discussion about institutional matters. The challenges inherent in dual mode universities were explored.

In this context we were encouraged by the conferring of EDEA awards to both the Open College of the University of Papua New Guinea and one of its students. As in many dual mode institutions, the Open College enrolls more students than the rest of the University put together and these awards attest to the quality of its work.

Maybe it is time for vice-chancellors of dual-mode institutions to change their perspective by 180° and treat the distance learning unit as the core of the university and the campus as an ancillary activity?

One preoccupation of many institutions, both open universities and dual-mode institutions, is the phenomenon of cross-border distance education that began with the University of London 150 years ago. We had excellent sessions on this. I retain, in particular, the threat that degree mills and bogus college pose to those who try to provide cross-border distance learning with integrity. Only the combined efforts of governments, employers and institutions will succeed in removing this global scourge which can so easily damage our own efforts.

Those are some of the issues that have occupied our time at this forum.

What about the dogs that did not bark? What were the subjects that we didn't talk about much? In some cases we must admit that some dogs didn't bark because we muzzled them. The Programme Committee discouraged descriptions of institutional practice, and may have thereby inadvertently reduced the number of contributions on research.

But some omissions are more disturbing. A session with the title 'Where have all the flowers gone' asked why there was less emphasis on gender at PCF5 despite the fact that we were tackling issues like health where gender is a central factor.

Similarly, we talked a lot about the need to educate and train more teachers, but where was the beef? With one or two honourable exceptions we avoided the practical aspects of the challenge.

Finally we also experienced the hi-tech, low tech dilemma common at conferences like this. Have we been carried away by fancy technologies when simpler technologies, like schools in a box, books and community media, have more to offer learning for development in the medium term?

That said, I acknowledge that the sessions in our cross-cutting theme of learner support did have a lot to say about the importance of tutoring, which is just as important in eLearning as in older methods. We must remember that the great strength that we bring to the new technologies as distance educators is our knowledge and experience of the basics on which good learning is built, quality materials, efficient logistics and strong learner support.

That, colleagues, is my view of the tip the iceberg that I have seen in the last few days. You will have seen different things and attached importance to other developments. I have not mentioned the Technology Showcase, which has enormously enriched this Forum, and much, much more.

But I hope my account has triggered some memories. Remember that PCF5 is not over when you leave London.

Now is when you start working to sustain the networks that you have developed here. Many of the papers of the conference are on WikiEducator and provide a wonderful resource for you to mine in future.

For our part, the Commonwealth of Learning will reflect deeply on the conclusions and recommendations arising from your discussion as we prepare our next Three-Year Plan for the period 2009-12. The timing is excellent because this process is just beginning and it will culminate in the presentation of the Plan to the 17<sup>th</sup> Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Malaysia next June.

Before I give you my parting quotation, let me thank Sir Graeme personally for chairing this session and, on your behalf let me thank him and all his University of London colleagues for the wonderful conference that they have put on.

I leave you with these words from one of our keynote speakers, Carol Bellamy:

"You are all part of that tapestry of innovation that we so desperately need to weave in order to get the job done. Open and distance learning is about more than closing the digital divide, as real and concerning as that is. It's a critical part of closing the human rights divide between those who will grow up literate - with skills, possibilities, and hope - and those who will not."

Thank you