

Higher Education, Service to the Community and ICTs



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*Higher Education, Service to the Community and ICTs
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Prologue

Ministers, Colleagues:

This is a carefully staged event so let me begin with a prologue. Three days ago, at UNESCO's World Conference on Higher Education I was given seven minutes to say something intelligent about internationalisation, regionalisation and globalisation in higher education. Today I have six minutes, which I guess shows that the private sector likes to beat the public sector when it comes to efficiency in communication.

Our title is *Higher Education, Service to the Community and ICTs*.

At the World Conference I seemed to catch the imagination of the participants by expressing the fundamental challenge of higher education in the form of a triangle. I believe in playing to my strengths and since I am known in Paris this week as the 'triangle guy' I will use it again.

However, this time I am using it to express the three traditional elements of the mission of higher education: teaching, research and service to the community.

The point I wish to make here is that while all higher education institutions give lip service to their role of community service it is usually a low priority, as I try to express here.

I'm not going to play with the triangle any more, although it could be a nice tool for profiling different types of higher education institutions.

Although I am delivering these remarks their principal author is my Commonwealth of Learning colleague Dr Kodhandaraman Balasubramanian who came to us after experience with India's famous M. S. Swaminathan Foundation. Some years ago Dr. Bala, as we all call him, researched the reasons for the

relative underperformance of the ICT kiosks that were being placed in the villages of India. He then acted on the lessons learned by helping to developing a model for using these kiosks as part of an effective system to improve the prosperity of rural communities. So today I am talking about Dr. Bala's work at the Commonwealth of Learning.

Introduction

So much for the prologue: we are in France and Caesar divided Gaul into three parts. I shall make three points.

First, higher education should engage with communities by playing to their agendas rather than imposing its own view of the world.

Second, ICTs are only useful in rural development as part of a wider system.

Third, we must focus on creating a new type of professional, which we at the Commonwealth of Learning call an *infomediary*.

For a wider discussion of these issues I refer you to the background paper [*ICTs for Higher Education*](#) that COL prepared for this week's World Conference.

Developing the Community Agenda

I start with the first point. The early ICT kiosks in the villages of India underperformed because they were imposed from outside with little attention given to preparing the community for their use. 'Build it and they will come' seemed to be the principle. However, relatively few came.

The fundamental purpose of COL's work in rural areas is to make villages more prosperous and to empower the farmers, most of whom are women. We agree with the quote from St Lucia's Nobel Laureate Sir Arthur Lewis that Dame Pearlette Louisy repeated this week: 'Knowledge is more important than money in developing communities'.

We simply add that the most useful knowledge is that which answers questions people have already formulated.

So our first step is to work with the whole village to get its members to come up with a collective view of the most likely route to greater prosperity. This process is the basis for subsequent success. In the language of sociology the aim is to create not just *structural* social capital but *cognitive* social capital.

The result is a village view of a promising approach to greater prosperity. It might be growing a new crop, a more effective chain to market, or better use of water.

I shall cite a village where they decided to improve their dairying. This then generates questions, starting

with ‘how do I tell a good milk cow from a poor milk cow?’ For answers to this and later questions we turn to a consortium of universities that has agreed to answer the villagers’ queries rather than push their own solutions. They came up with a check list which some of village women converted into graphics in the village ICT kiosk.

ICTs Are Part of a Wider System

This brings me to the second point. The ICT kiosk is not the be all and end all; it is simply a vehicle for communicating knowledge. Community radio would do just as well.

A vital part of the model is money, so we get the local banks involved on the promise of starting a process of continuously improving prosperity. In its own interest the bank brings in a local dairy company which buys the milk if it passes quality standards. So the farmers have to learn about quality testing – and so the learning process goes on.

The challenge is to bring this model to tens of thousands of villages, which brings me to the third point.

The Need for Infomediaries

A new type of professional is required for this and other development processes. We call them infomediaries. The young person who holds the franchise for the village ICT kiosk plays this role *de facto* but could do it better with training. A community college near Madurai in Tamil Nadu has started a programme for doing this. We believe that tens of thousands of infomediaries are needed to help rural communities create visions for a better future and then help them find the answers to the questions those visions pose.

That, Ministers and Colleagues, is a short account of a successful programme.

The women you saw in those pictures taken three years ago have increased their incomes in a sustainable manner and feel greatly more empowered. Their learning continues. Furthermore the universities involved are changing their own approach to community interaction as a result of the programme.

A similar programme is now operating in Sri Lanka with a different variant of the model. But I shall obey the moderator’s orders and stop there.