

# *Inauguration Message*

---



## *AAOU 2012 Annual Conference: Expanding the Frontiers of Knowledge through Open and Distance Learning in Changing Societies*

*Japan*

*17 October 2012*

*by Professor Asha Kanwar  
Commonwealth of Learning*

It gives me great pleasure to be at the 26<sup>th</sup> AAOU Conference on ‘Expanding the Frontiers of Knowledge through ODL in changing societies’. This theme finds resonance in the Commonwealth of Learning’s (COL) own mission of promoting ‘learning for development’. Over the years, COL has harnessed the potential of Open and Distance Learning or ODL not just to support formal education but also non-formal learning in skills development, agriculture and health.

‘Expanding the Frontiers of Knowledge through ODL in changing societies’ is a timely theme. As we look at the demographic changes in different societies we find two trends—an aging population in certain regions and the increase in young people in Africa and South Asia. At the same time, technologies are driving the change in societies at a dizzying pace. How can we combine the strengths of technologies with the needs of these various constituencies who need ongoing training and retraining? Lifelong learning offers the opportunity to address this challenge. ODL can be an important strategy in implementing lifelong learning and making the critical shift from catering to education for the industrial society to education for the knowledge society. The knowledge society requires certain skills which we often call 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. How can open universities use available technologies such as social media to integrate these skills into the curriculum?

Universities have traditionally had three functions: teaching, research and outreach. ODL institutions have developed effective methodologies for increasing access to learning. But have they focused enough attention on research and outreach? Without these two components, we will not be able to expand the frontiers of knowledge through ODL. Within the context of the global economic downturn, governments will look for alternative paths for human resource development. ODL will have a greater importance and relevance than ever before. It is time for the ODL community to revisit its original mission and mandate and to revive the pioneering spirit with which it first started to open up the frontiers of education.

COL is proud to support the work of the AAOU, which has become a dynamic forum for discussion and debates about ODL. AAOU also promotes regional exchanges of scholars and recognises excellence in research through its various awards. As ODL continues to expand, there is a growing concern about the

quality of provision and services. In many countries ODL still continues to be regarded as a second-rate, second-chance option with low completion rates. Why is this so? More research is needed to understand how we can address the issue of dropout and attrition. The AAOU has an important role to play. It can become a platform that encourages the implementation of quality standards in the member open universities facilitating linkages and promoting the sharing of good practice.

I have always enjoyed participating in the AAOU conferences and have had the honour to be present at the last three. COL has been a partner over several years and hopes to accompany AAOU in its journey towards greater excellence. Let me wish this conference every success.