

First Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF1)

In partnership with the Brunei Darussalam Ministry of Education and Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Empowerment through Knowledge and Technology: A Celebration of Ten Years of the Commonwealth of Learning
1-5 March 1999

WELCOMING ADDRESS

Dr. H. Ian Macdonald, O.C.
Chairman of the Board of Governors
The Commonwealth of Learning

Your Royal Highness The Crown Prince, Pengiran Muda Haji Al-Muhtahdee Billah,
Your Highness,
Your Excellency, Chief Emeka Anyaoku,
Honourable Ministers of Education and the Permanent Secretary of Education for Brunei,
Vice-Chancellor of the University,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests, and
Members of the Commonwealth of Learning's Extended Family

Your Royal Highness, it is gracious of you to be with us on this historic occasion as we celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Founding of the Commonwealth of Learning at our Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning.

I have observed that, at the conclusion of a horse-race, the media bombard the jockey with questions while usually ignoring the horse. Where the Commonwealth of Learning is concerned, I am simply the jockey but we have a distinguished thoroughbred of distance education and open learning in the form of our President, Dr. Dhanarajan. Since he, along with our staff, are responsible for the pre-eminence and accomplishments of COL, I have asked him to share in the welcoming remarks this morning, and you will hear from him at the conclusion of this ceremony.

May I welcome all of you and thank you for enabling the Commonwealth of Learning to have such a rich and varied intellectual feast in celebration of our 10th Anniversary. We are particularly gratified that 47 of the 54 Commonwealth countries are represented here, constituting such a splendid mosaic of educational theory and practice. Together, you reinforce the unique qualities of COL:

- Founded in 1987 and established in 1988 in Vancouver, Canada, COL is the only official Commonwealth agency located outside London;
- Our presence is felt in all realms of education: primary, secondary, tertiary, non-formal, and technical;
- Our delivery systems range from conventional print, to radio, video, film, television and electronic communications; and
- We are totally dedicated to human resource development and the improvement of life in a Commonwealth which represents one-quarter of the world's peoples.

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And why is that so essential today? During my flight from Canada, I was watching a 15-minute BBC News Report which was a virtual litany of inhumanity borne of racial intolerance and conflict and that represented merely the tip of the iceberg. I was left feeling that people are the world's truly endangered species. Again, where do we look for hope? My answer is simply: to education, and the opportunities which it can provide.

And yet, as we approach the Millennium, we still fall short, by 140 million, in fulfilling the goal of having every child with access to basic education by the year 2000, many of whom are girls for whom even the most basic primary education is unavailable. And so, increased access remains the dominant challenge which can only be overcome by "schools without walls" in the words of the late Marshall McLuhan, i.e. by distance education and open learning. As we consider the variety of papers, discussions, and workshops of such highly practical flavour available to us this week, it is self-evident that we will emerge the better prepared to wage our war for improved educational access.

I am reminded of a story that is told of Ronald Reagan when he was Governor of California. Protesting students had surrounded his car, many holding placards saying "We are the future". Reagan scribbled down his reply and held it to the car window; it read, "In that case, I'll sell my bonds." Ladies and Gentlemen, the students were right! Education is our best hope for increasing numbers of people to withstand the excesses of globalization, and its widening gap between rich and poor, haves and have-nots, the favoured and the oppressed.

We in COL cannot unaided do all that is required throughout the Commonwealth, but we in COL can provide the leadership and encouragement to a legion of educational pilgrims bearing the banners of distance education and open learning. Your presence here is a source of immense inspiration for us, in COL, for without your support, your participation, and your shared expertise, we could never succeed, - and we are determined to succeed!

Welcome to our Forum.

Dr. H. Ian Macdonald, O.C.
Chairman of the Board of Governors
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BRUNEI, 2 March 1999