

Access and Success in Learning: Your Conclusions



*6th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning
Access & Success in Learning: Global Development Perspectives*

*Kochi, Kerala, India
28 November 2010*

Closing Remarks

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Introduction

I thank the Programme Chair for giving me time at this session to make some concluding remarks now rather than waiting until this afternoon.

The work of COL marches on and tomorrow I must attend the formal launch, in the presence of the Princess Royal, of the new University of Seychelles. COL is pleased to have played a role in the planning of the new university, building on a strong relationship with Seychelles. The then Minister of Education, Danny Faure – who is now Vice-President – played a key role in initiating the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

Seychelles is a partner in the COL & Hewlett Foundation six-country project to transform the complete upper secondary curriculum into Open Educational Resources. Finally, many of you will have met my Seychellois colleague John Lesperance, who is facilitating the development of the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth. For these reasons you will understand why I shall leave after lunch for the launch ceremony tomorrow and I ask your forbearance.

In the next few minutes I shall share impressions of the conference. I have called this short intervention *Access & Success in Learning: Your Conclusions*. I say ‘your conclusions’ because although I have not spoken to all of you I have canvassed my COL colleagues, especially the four theme leaders. They are all sensitive and objective people and I hope that their impressions broadly correspond to your impressions. I have encapsulated some of my own thoughts about the conference in my daily blog.

For one of those blogs I borrowed Amartya Sen’s title *The Argumentative Indian*. One of the reasons that India is great site for a conference is that Indians like to argue and disagree. The discussions at many of our sessions were much more robust than if we had been hosted by a more bland and respectful culture. A

hundred of those argumentative Indians are from our partner IGNOU and in the belief that healthy debate leads to the truth I have used press interviews and blogs to challenge them and urge them to even greater efforts.

Four Themes

We had four themes. Let me take them one by one, starting with Skills Development.

Skills Development

Skills development is the next frontier for ODL. ODL is gaining increasing recognition as a way of increasing access to technical and vocational development and the quality of that development. This is particularly true for the large numbers of people who seek non-formal skills development, often for work in the informal economy which accounts for most work and self-employment opportunities in many countries. The main obstacle to expansion is the need to train teachers in the use of ICTs for vocational teaching and learning. This means that collaboration between institutions and development partners is vital for the optimal use of resources. One clear aim of collaboration should be the creation, adaptation and use of Open Educational Resources.

Social Justice

Under the theme of social justice you stressed that if it is to contribute to development ODL must be placed within an existing development strategy involving participatory processes with stakeholders. Careful strategies are needed to bridge the gap between policies, which should integrate a gender sensitive framework, and implementation.

You placed strong emphasis on quality assurance of ODL as a means to social justice. This means first, capacity building for staff in understanding and managing quality assurance. Second, quality assurance frameworks must focus on social outcomes and not on educational outputs alone – this means including a social auditing of learning systems and materials in terms of gender, class and environment.

You also noted that mobile phones and ICTs are not just delivery mechanisms for learning materials. They can play a major role in facilitating a participatory process for contextualize learning and interactive learning. You noted a strong move towards mobile technologies and asked for more case studies about their appropriate use in learning for development. It's time to put more stress on pedagogy and development and less on technology.

Formal Education

In discussing formal education you also placed strong emphasis on quality assurance, noting first that quality assessment in higher education will only be significant if well integrated to that taking place at secondary level.

The Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth is an important laboratory for the use of technology in formal education. You stressed how the VUSSC has allowed for the local ownership of programmes emanating from a Commonwealth community engaged in developing and delivering courses relevant to small states.

Collaborative capacity building has been an essential foundation to the work and the VUSSC Transnational Qualifications Framework is proving to be a point of reference for establishing national qualifications frameworks. You insisted strongly on the need for accreditation and quality assurance in programmes involving small states.

You believe that open schooling will develop strongly in the coming years, with a particular focus on professional and vocational education. It will be important to integrate this development with the more academic curriculum. Expanding research on open schooling is vital in order to convince policy makers of its efficacy.

In teacher education you stressed the importance of a focus on the classroom, the potential of mobile technologies and the absolute importance of focussing on quality rather than access numbers

It was a common refrain throughout the conference that technology is not an end in itself. Some suggested that eLearning should be viewed as an umbrella term for quality improvement strategy; that ICTs should be used to innovate the way we teach and expect students to learn, and particularly to support greater interaction and communication in learning.

Community Development

Regarding community development you added ‘dialogue’ to the key concept of *participation*, by all members of the community in all steps of the process. Some recalled Paolo Freire’s words that “without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education”.

In this context you urged that we emphasise community processes, such as sharing stories and experience, as a way to ground community learning products. Educational institutions do not have a monopoly on learning: they need to adopt models that privilege communication (exchange, dialogue, partnership) and get over top-down approaches to community development.

Finally, the Community Development theme also stress that we must focus less on technology and more on how “innovations” are used. How do they facilitate or disable participation, learning and action. You noted in this context the increasing appreciation of the role of community radio and the important task is of ensuring that community radio is an expression of the community.

Expression of thanks

Those, colleagues, are the impressions I have gathered about the conference. Let me now express my thanks to those who have pulled this conference together. Our Chair and Vice-President will complete my brief but sincere acknowledgements this afternoon.

We are most grateful to our partners at IGNOU for the intensity of their involvement in the conference. I believe that a hundred IGNOU colleagues have been here with us in Kochi and they have certainly made an active contribution to the sessions, both as paper presenter and discussants.

It is not easy for partners to put together a conference programme when there is a 10½ time difference between their working days. COL thanks Professor Ramanujam for his dedication to the task and his most

articulate contributions to the plenary sessions. Behind him is a large team of IGNOU colleagues and we are most grateful for their input in reviewing papers.

IGNOU is a huge organisation and, having myself led another open university that seemed large but was only one tenth the size I greatly admire the way that the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Pillai, he has been able to devote so much time to PCF6.

It gives us special pleasure that he brought the conference to his home city of Kochi. The diversity of IGNOU's activities is breathtaking. My comments that were reported in the press about the difficulty of running both elements of a dual-mode programme well were not meant as a criticism of using face-to-face methods in postgraduate research programmes and in-company training. I ask Professor Pillai to pass on our thanks to all his colleagues, both in Delhi and in IGNOU's local centres, who have contributed so much to the lively atmosphere at PCF6.

Finally, I must, above all, thank you, the delegates, for your patience, good humour and very active participation. A moment ago I reported your conclusion that good ODL involves participatory processes. On behalf of COL I thank you for the flexibility and the spirit of collaboration that you showed in compensating for the weaknesses of the printed programme by standing in for no-shows and creating the sessions that you wanted.

We often talk, rather casually, about the ODL community but on the evidence of the last few days this really is a community and one that practices what it preaches.

I end by looking forward. We must now think about PCF7. I invite expressions of interest for hosting the next of these Pan-Commonwealth Forums. We will send out a formal call for proposals very shortly but I encourage informal dialogue with those organisations that might be interested. I recall that previous PCFs have been held in Brunei, South Africa, New Zealand, Jamaica and London.

COL looks forward to seeing many of you at that event. Meanwhile I wish you safe travels from Kochi and hope that insights and that you have gained by sharing experiences here will be useful to you in your work in open learning wherever it may be.