

# *Access to Education: A Guarantee of a Less Divided World?*

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*by Dr. H. Ian Macdonald, Chairman  
The Commonwealth of Learning*

## **Transcript**

I hope that Ram Reddy would have approved of the title of my Lecture- Access to Education: A Guarantee of a Less Divided World? I am sure that he would. During the all too brief period when I was privileged to work with him on the Board of Governors of The Commonwealth of Learning, I became instantly aware of two qualities: first, he insisted on knowing the objective of any course of action; second, he was in every sense a citizen of the world. And so, although he was a pioneer in the methodologies of distance education and open learning, he was forceful in forever raising the issue of the basic purpose of education. That purpose was no narrow or self-serving end; rather, it had a relationship to the concept of making the world a better place, both locally and globally. That is the task with which I wish to wrestle in my reflective monologue today.

For many years and in most places, philosophers have argued about the purpose of education: is it for individual betterment as an end in itself, or should it be for occupational preparation? In his famous discourses in 1852, Cardinal John Henry Newman argued: "Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward." And yet, at that very time, the great universities of Oxford and Cambridge were also designed for occupational preparation: to produce teachers, lawyers, ministers, doctors and public servants.

The answer, of course, is that education has always served both purposes. If the education is well conducted and if the learning process is reciprocal between student and teacher, then human development will occur both in the broad sense of the term as well as in the utilitarian sense. Certainly, over the past

forty-six years of my varied career, I have found that to be the case. How else to explain the enduring thirst for education? In that time, I have encountered a number of interesting students B mostly successful, but often unusual. I think here of two in particular. In the first class that I taught on the Principles of Economics, there was a young man in his early thirties who was already a multi-millionaire; he had benefited from the post-war boom in Canada to make a fortune in housing development. And I was to teach him the Principles of Economics? When I asked him why he had now come to university, he replied that he wanted to be a successful human being as well as a rich entrepreneur! The second individual took his degree at age 87. He had left school when only 14 to help support his family, and had worked all his life at a variety of jobs. When I asked him the same question, he replied that he wanted to be better prepared for the after life than he had been for a first! Whatever the merits of the case, it could certainly be argued that both were enjoying a luxury, in contrast to the millions of people in the world who are denied an education even of the most basic kind. However, both cases illustrate two points about education:

- the primary importance of access;
- the more enduring purposes of education.

Certainly this is what this University and The Commonwealth of Learning are all about!

Education is a term of vast depth and breadth. As with all such eclectic words, we rarely tend to question its exact meaning. Yet, today, the word is more pervasive than ever, even giving rise to the post-industrial noun B the knowledge society. If, indeed, we are or are to be a knowledge society, and if knowledge is to be the key to the promised land, then we must devote serious attention to two issues:

Who will have access to education which is surely the key to the knowledge society?

How can the knowledge society be shaped to ensure a less divided and more peaceful world?

Hence, the title of my Lecture is intended both to encourage contemplation of access to education and to consider the consequences of education once achieved.

In a more light-hearted sense, the results of education may not always be what was expected. The story is told of a young university graduate reporting to work for his first job. His employers greeted him, and promptly handed him a broom. "What's this for?" inquired the young man. "That's your job - sweeping the floor" answered the boss. In righteous indignation, the new employee drew himself up to his full height and proclaimed: "But I have a B.A. degree!" "Well, just relax," was the reply: "We'll show you how to use it!"

How ironic it is that the things we value most are so often the source of our humour. In fact, nothing could give me greater satisfaction than the association, which your invitation to give this Lecture, provides with the Indira Gandhi National Open University and the name Ram Reddy. Your country is an ancient society with a perpetually modern outlook; you have been pioneers in the world of distance education and communication technology. And this University has become a beacon for what is too readily an endangered concept: universal accessibility for higher education at a time of our greatest need.

The death of a dear friend reminded me of a prototype of what you represent in this university. In the early 1950s, when I was a student at Balliol College, Oxford, the College established an Open Scholarship for a mature student, working in a modest job. Leaving his family in the Midlands, my friend came to Oxford at age 45, lived in the College, entered fully into university life, and after three years took a distinguished degree. From a background of various humble positions in a hospital, John went on to become a distinguished professor of hospital administration first in England and finally in Australia. This is not in any sense to denigrate his earlier work, nor to suggest an elitist interpretation of higher education. Rather, I am speaking of the opportunity for maximizing individual human achievement which is the ultimate purpose of education.

That Oxford should have made a place available in that fashion inspired him, and left an indelible impression on me. As a result, I have often speculated that had open universities been created fifty years earlier, perhaps my Scottish parents (who left school at age 14) might have followed the same route. Open universities and distance education have transformed the meaning of accessibility to university, and made it a living reality. And so, the beneficiaries are not only the legion of graduates, but also the community of nations wherever those graduates reside.

In fact, the miracles of educational technology make access possible now on a scale heretofore unimagined. In 1982, during my first visit to India, I vividly recall a conversation with the late Madam Indira Gandhi who said that India's educational objective at that time was to have every child with access to primary education by the year 1995. But, she commented, to realise that objective by conventional means would require the addition of 10 million school places a year until 1995; as a result, there had to be another way!

Thirty years earlier, my good friend and colleague, the late Marshall McLuhan, was talking about "schools without walls". At that time, he was confronted daily by a combination of people who neither understood his message nor believed it possible. Indeed, only a few years ago, ET as exemplified by the well-known film meant extra-terrestrial; opportunities such as now exist were perceived to be only within the realm of another world.

Today, ET means educational technology capable of taking education to people rather than people to education. To serve that objective in the 54 nations of the Commonwealth is the mandate of The Commonwealth of Learning. Founded in 1987 and established in 1988 in Vancouver, Canada, COL is the only official Commonwealth institution located outside of London. Working to support education at all levels B primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and non-formal, and employing all means of communication B print, audio, visual and electronic, The Commonwealth of Learning seeks to encourage open learning and distance education by pursuit of the following six central objectives:

- facilitating access to affordable, high-quality learning materials and resources in support of formal and non-formal education;
- promoting the use of appropriate communications and information technologies for the purpose of open and distance learning;

- providing academic and professional services (including credit assessment and accumulation; quality assurance; research evaluation and review; and access to training);
- supplying information and advice on distance learning systems, programmes and technologies, both to practitioners and developers alike; advocating the use of distance education and open learning as an effective means of improving access to education at all levels;
- focusing on marginalized groups, particularly through open schooling, non-formal education and teacher education.

When the history of these times is written, I suggest that it will pronounce the new communications technologies to be of equal or even greater significance than the Gutenberg era, and we are privileged to be part of it. However, let us not under-estimate the challenge.

As we proceed into the new millennium, over one billion people are lacking the literacy necessary to sign their name or to read a book. Among them are over 140 million children who do not have access to primary education; a large proportion of those denied education are girls and women. Of the children with access to primary education, a large percentage of those who find themselves in the poorest countries of the world will be in crowded classrooms that are in a very bad state of repair and some will be in situations where there may not be any classrooms at all. Many will be taught by untrained or poorly trained teachers, located in ill-equipped schools with no learning materials, laboratories, libraries or connections to the outside world. Moreover, a good proportion of these children will not complete their primary school education. Most of these un- or under-provided learners are living in Commonwealth member states located in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. These countries will also suffer educational deprivation at other levels on the educational ladder.

These young people, along with the billion other adults who never received nor benefitted from education when they were young, will find themselves attempting to function in a global environment where:

- long-term job success necessitates a focus on continuous learning regardless of profession, geographic location or age;
- developing a strong human resource base is essential for economic and social development;
- training and the upgrading of skills and knowledge are necessary to improve the productive capacity of the labour force;
- relevant education and training have been accepted as potential solutions to address key issues such as environmental degradation, burgeoning population, and domestic violence; and,
- the impact of technology and increased levels of education on governance issues is being recognized, assessed and appreciated.

It is under these circumstances that the design and delivery of education is being considered by nations

rich and poor. A consensus is beginning to emerge that opportunities for and provisions of life-long learning will require a reconsideration of the ways in which the educational environment is constructed, organized, structured, governed and financed. There is also an increasing acknowledgment of a shift in instructional philosophy where the instructor or teacher is no longer the sole source of knowledge but, instead, acts as a facilitator, supporting student learning.

Distance education, therefore, is being incorporated into mainstream education and training efforts; it is reshaping the new educational landscape, including to whom and how education is delivered. Educational designs are being developed as rapid increases in technology continue to collapse spatial boundaries, and Commonwealth countries continue to lead the world in the imaginative ways in which they have applied distance and open learning. However, that capability is neither distributed equally among all Commonwealth countries nor in all sectors of education in those countries where open and distance learning has found success in one form or another.

The Commonwealth of Learning can take pride in the fact that, over a period of eleven years of work in and for the Commonwealth, it has not only brought attention to the opportunities presented by open and distance learning but also trained people, built partnerships, developed models and provided expanding capabilities among nations of the Commonwealth in the application of open and distance learning.

Unfortunately, much remains to be done especially since the arrival of the new technologies that are reshaping the ways in which the world operates. In order to be both sensitive and meaningful in the value it can add to Commonwealth education, COL, as part of the strategy for its second decade, wishes to be regionally sensitive, sectorally relevant and strategically opportunistic. Our view of the needs of the Commonwealth, and the service we can provide in response to those needs, has been shaped by the many consultations we have had over the last three years.

In all regions of the Commonwealth, there is an acknowledged need to sensitize stakeholders to the variety of new learning technologies applicable to the delivery of quality education. There is also increasing demand for the use of open and distance learning methodologies to address a number of capacity building issues. These include the extension of literacy and numeracy skills among millions of adults through the use of radio, television and telematics, helping rural women to develop entrepreneurial skills, assisting agricultural extension workers to improve their capacity to educate farm workers, the training of legislators in legislative drafting, increasing the speed of in service training of un- or under-trained teachers, and delivering continuous professional development programmes for health workers, managers and administrators.

The last five years has seen a phenomenal increase in the application of new technologies to the learning environment. This development is removing the distinction between conventional and distance learning. It is also eroding political and geographical barriers to the movement of knowledge. While many view this as a good thing others fear the possibility of a new form of imperialism underlying these developments. This imperialism has all the potential to undermine a nation's intellectual and cultural assets in the longer term. Although we must always be mindful of those risks, a lot can be done to increase the national capability to exploit the new technologies, to increase local competitiveness, and to enhance local

capacities to create and deliver learning and cultural products to the people.

To achieve this, skills must be developed to use the technologies in the learning environment, content has to be produced in sufficient quantity and quality, information technology connectivity has to be improved, appliances have to be made available at affordable costs, appropriate uses for the technologies have to be identified, and policy frameworks need to be established to support these ventures. The Commonwealth experience in all of these areas can be put to good use for the Commonwealth at large, and that is COL's principal mission now.

To return to the title of my Lecture, there can surely be no doubt that we will make substantial inroads on the issue of access over the next twenty-five years. And there is no doubt B both in developed and developing countries - that E-Learning will accelerate exponentially. But, the world of globalization has been one where the rich have become richer while the developing world struggles to gain a share of the world's wealth. Thus, will E-Learning widen the gap between individuals and nations more than access help to close it; that is to say, will the social divide become wider? There is a huge inherent danger that this will be so. Therefore, to minimize the impact toward social divide and maximize the prospect of social good, we must make a profound effort in certain directions. I cannot improve upon the words of our Commonwealth of Learning President, Dr. Gajaraj Dhanarajan, who recently cautioned us with the following admonition:

"One would be foolish to question the importance and relevance of the Internet and the www for education in this new decade. At its worst, it has the ability to connect communities of learners and teachers as well as other knowledge seekers and providers and at its best it could very well be the tool that education has been waiting for these past thousand years. Its promise is only limited by the imagination and capacity of the people who can apply and benefit from it. However, access to that promise should not be limited to only a few who are wealthy, live in information rich societies, and have skills, knowledge and support to use the tools but also be provided to the many who lack all of these but who need education and training just as much as the 'haves' to escape from the traps of deprivation. To benefit the many, we must get some things right about on-line education."

To that end, it is essential that we pursue the following six objectives:

**Developing policies that preserve our concerns for equity and equality of access:** At the governmental level these must, of necessity, touch on telecommunication policies and regulations, tariffs, telecommunication infrastructure, etc. At the institutional level, there is also a need for those who are aggressively pushing for the delivery of Online education to remind themselves that the purpose of education is ill served if the methods we adopt deny that education to a great majority of our people. Policies on education in almost every democratic state in the modern world are unambiguous about this ideal, but between the ideal and practise a gap often emerges especially amongst our autonomous institutions. There is an urgent need to reinforce the policy as was demonstrated by Don Thornhill, Chairman of the Higher Education Authority of Ireland in 1999. "Policies for equality are amongst the most important policies of a university. Education is one of the most effective instruments available for

addressing inequality and . . . Higher education has a key role." In that statement, Thornhill was reinforcing the Equal Status Bill of the Republic of Ireland which makes it the responsibility of an educational establishment not to discriminate in relation to:

- the admission or the terms or conditions of admission of a person as a student;
- the access of a student to any course, facility or benefit provided by the institution.

Consequently, there is a case to be made, in relation to On-line courses, for creating policy guidelines to ensure that those delivering such services make appropriate provision (such as free supply of appliances, connections, etc.) to marginalised groups in order for them to share in the benefits.

**Identifying the fitness of purpose of Online courses:** Current levels of academic preparedness, administrative and ICT infrastructure make it necessary to define a clear purpose for engaging in Online courses. Training programmes rather than academic courses may better fit this new form of delivery. Under present circumstance there is a group that may have reasonable access to the necessary ICT infrastructure to participate in Online education. These are people who are already in the workforce (globally, some 2 billion people) and need reskilling, continuing professional development, post-graduate training, updating of knowledge, etc. There is a strategic advantage in focusing on this group of people first, and as communication infrastructure as well as other services related to supporting the ICTs become more commonplace, to move on to academic programmes gradually.

**Investing in people even faster than investing in technology:** At the risk of stating the obvious, what good is a digital environment if the key players do not have the skills and interest to use its potential effectively? Being Internet savvy does not necessarily make a teacher an effective Online educator. Very few institutions are investing sufficient resources to train staff to teach Online. Use of other ICTs rather than limiting ourselves to the Internet. Let me make a plea for the greater exploitation of other ICTs. The short-term benefit is the easy accessibility of such technologies as radio, video, print by large parts of our populations. The long-term benefits include carrying forward knowledge products so produced into the Internet environment.

**Planning for sustainability and success:** A good portion of the 50,000 or so courses that are currently available on the Internet in North America today may not be available next year. In fact, a number of Online course providers today may not be there next year. Remember the University of California's grand scheme! I do not think a large part of the world is quite ready for non-sustainable educational ventures or adventurers. We need planning and sustainability, we need to ensure customer protection and we need to beware of "diploma mills". We cannot do any of these if public institutions themselves become the perpetrators, doing not much for education other than selling their brand name.

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**Good practice:** We need to develop global not just North American standards of good practice - practices that will help continue the traditional values of and respect for education, pastoral care of students, respect for academic freedom and dignity, quality of the content and tuition, excellence in exit standards and, above all, ensure education that is available for all. The market is important and it is seductive, but its seduction should not be allowed to turn a social good into a social divide. It took some thirty years by those who were engaged in the promotion of distance education to gain respect, recognition and acceptance B sentiments that were lost during an earlier era as a result of bad practice by many who engaged in correspondence education. We do not want Online courses to suffer the same disrespect of earlier correspondence education.

With constant scrutiny, we can shape our future to ensure that distance education and open learning, particularly E-Learning, promote social good rather than social divide. But this will not happen as the night follows the day. Educators throughout the world must first reaffirm the following seven principles:

1. Educational technology is a significant supplement, but it does not replace the human element and the qualitative role of the teacher. In all of our programmes, there must be a human presence at the end of the line. Pedagogy must remain pre-eminent.
2. Education is not simply about the enlargement of the gross national product. Indeed, in these days of concern over sustainable development, we must continue our efforts to take some of the grossness out of the gross national product, and to produce a world of greater peace and compassion.
3. If the final result, both in terms of nations and individuals, should be that the rich get richer and the lot of the poorer is not enhanced, then we shall have failed utterly. Therefore, we must never turn our backs on those for whom technology will be slower to take root, in the interest of building monuments to ourselves as distance educators . Access must assume whatever form is most practical in any given situation.
4. Education must continue to widen horizons and be life-long; it must not be limited to short-term utilitarian purposes.
5. The twin goals of education for its own sake and occupational relevance must maintain a symbiotic relationship, as they always have done.
6. We must ensure that increasing use of educational technology does not encourage a paternal as opposed to a partnership approach between individuals, institutions and nations. I can assure you that The Commonwealth of Learning, in employing open learning and distance education as a means of ensuring greater opportunities and greater equality, operates from the principle that we will all learn from one



another in the process. In that sense, we are a catalyst rather than a missionary, forging a partnership process between Commonwealth countries.

7. Finally, we must renew our efforts to ensure that education sustains rather than overwhelming the local culture, values and objectives of all parts of the developing world. This is surely essential, not only for its own sake, but also to withstand some of the less desirable consequences of globalization which could so readily become homogenization.

Under these conditions, we can all take heart for the future of the knowledge society as a contributor not only to economic development but also to human advancement. In these times, the best means of achieving that objective will be found through individual and institutional collaboration. In our joint efforts with the Indira Gandhi National Open University, we in The Commonwealth of Learning will continue to demonstrate our belief in that proposition and in recognition of the example of the late Ram Reddy.