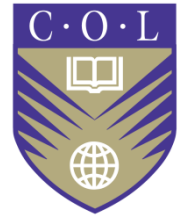


# *Session: Qualifications delivered: New methods, New Providers 2020*

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*Global Education 20/20: Creating partnerships to educate the global workforce of the future*

*Conference organised by The Economist, New York City, 10 March 2009*

*Session: Qualifications delivered: New methods, new providers 2020*

*Introductory comments by Sir John Daniel  
Commonwealth of Learning*

## **Introduction**

My task is to speak for ten minutes to spark the discussion. I shall bring together key themes that emerged in our earlier discussions with some of the sub-topics that we have been given for this session.

## **What is the Commonwealth of Learning**

Let me explain first where I am coming from – literally. The Commonwealth of Learning is an intergovernmental organisation of the 53-member Commonwealth that helps the 47 developing countries of the Commonwealth to use technology to increase the scale, scope and quality of learning at all levels, formal and informal. The focus is on fostering learning in support of development.

We are not active in the US, or in the industrialised countries of the Commonwealth like Canada and the UK, although they are among the forty plus Commonwealth governments that support our work with annual voluntary contributions. We have a particular mission to the small states that make up two-thirds of the Commonwealth's membership.

## **Leveraging Technology and Innovation**

My first comments, inspired by our work at COL, relate to our sub-topic on leveraging technology and innovation. A striking feature of today's discussions has been the widespread admission by our American colleagues that they seem to be incapable of rolling out technological and other innovations in education

at scale, even when they are successful in a pilot phase.

In the developing world you simply have to operate at scale. Nick Burnett from UNESCO gave us the figures this morning. The challenge is to bring education to tens of millions, even hundreds of millions of people.

In the industrialised west we are forgetting what the real strengths of technology are. Since this is a conference of The Economist I think it appropriate to quote Adam Smith, whose classic analysis of the operation of a pin factory captured brilliantly the strengths of technological innovation. The purpose of using technology in the pin factory was to operate at scale with consistent quality and to produce pins at a fraction of the unit cost that was possible with craft methods. Associated with the ‘hard’ technology of the metal bashing machines were the equally important ‘soft’ technologies of specialisation and division of labour.

We must retain Smith’s vision and not allow our use of learning technology to focus on simply giving students more flexibility and – perhaps, if we are lucky – a bit more quality. I suspect that many applications of technology in education in the industrialised West actually decrease the cost-effectiveness of the overall operation.

Developing countries cannot afford to waste money like this because their challenges are challenges of scale. This morning Nick Burnett talked about the growing success of the campaign to achieve Universal Primary Education. That success is creating a surge of primary graduates towards secondary education. Even to achieve an 80% net enrolment ratio in secondary education by 2015 the world – mostly the developing countries – will need to provide secondary schooling for 200 million children. Most countries do not have the resources to do this by conventional means, which is why the Commonwealth of Learning is promoting the spread of open schooling, the term used for the application of open and distance learning at this level.

Even the growing success of the campaign for Universal Primary Education will still leave some 75 million students out of primary school by 2015. Solving that problem will require more teachers, which is another challenge of scale. Africa needs nearly 4 million new teachers by 2015 – and the figure for the world as a whole is a staggering 18 million. Again, adding a few extra students in conventional teachers’ colleges will not crack the problem. Open and distance learning has been used successfully to train teachers in many countries for decades. This too must be rolled out at scale.

The range of technologies now available allows us to achieve greater effectiveness and greater cost-effectiveness in all three components of distance learning: course materials development; student support and system logistics. Open schooling, in particular, is an area where I would like to see private, for-profit providers become active because they are experienced in operating technology-based systems at scale to achieve high quality and low cost. I hope that the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation, ably represented here by Svava Bjarnasson, will get involved in encouraging this.

## Transferring Educational Methods from Mature to Emerging Markets

Another sub-topic for this session is transferring educational methods from mature to emerging markets. Here my advice is simply DON'T TRY. We have heard all day that the US and the West are not good at scaling up educational innovation. Developing countries are better at finding their own solutions to their own challenges. In the area of open schooling, for example the developing countries know how to operate at scale in a way the West does not. India's National Institute for Open Schooling enrolls 300,000 new pupils every year and it is just one of eleven open schools in the country. With 24,000 students the Namibian College of Open Learning, NAMCOL, is the largest educational institution in that country and accounts for 40% of all secondary enrolments.

In such circumstances transferring know how between Africa and South Asia is more useful than pushing expensive and inappropriate solutions from the north at either.

Another telling north-south comparison can be found in the introduction of computers into education. If you have time, take a look at the One-Laptop-Per-Child programme that was started at MIT by Nicolas Negroponte and compare it with the Hole-in-the-Wall initiative developed in India's National Institute of Information Technology by Sugata Mitra. It seems to me that Mitra's approach holds more promise. To begin with it has demonstrated the possibility of 'minimally invasive education' – a delicate way of saying that children can learn a great deal without any help from teachers. As a corollary it has shown that having several children per computer is more effective and productive than one laptop per child since the children work as a team and teach each other.

## Cross-Border Education and Accreditation

Finally, I should like to conflate two of our sub-topics and say a word about cross-border education and accreditation. Cross-border education is another new phenomenon that has the potential to operate cost-effectively at scale and help to provide education to the billions of people at the bottom of the economic pyramid.

One obstacle is that the Internet has spawned numerous degree mills and bogus colleges that are trying to muscle in on this market. Before the whole field of cross-border education gets a bad name it is vital that countries beef up their accreditation systems and place lists of their nationally recognised institutions on the web portal that UNESCO has created for this purpose. The US and forty other countries have already put such lists on the portal and the pressure is now on other countries to clean up their accreditation and quality assurance processes and do likewise.

My last point about cross-border education is that it is best done through partnerships. By teaming up with a local institution a foreign provider gains traction and credibility, while the local institution gets a chance to develop its capacity for using new educational methods. It is a win-win solution.