

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

Dato Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan
President and Chief Executive Officer
The Commonwealth of Learning

Duli Yang Teramat Mulia Paduka Seri Pengiran Muda Mahkota Pengiran Muda Haji Al-Muhtadee Billah;

His Excellency, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth;

Yang Berhormat Pehin Orang Kaya Laila Wijaya Dato Seri Setia Haji Awang Abdul Aziz;

Dr. H. Ian Macdonald, Chair, COL Board of Governors;

YDM Dato Haji Abu Bakar bin Haji Apong, Vice-Chancellor, UBD;

Honourable Ministers and Deputy Ministers of Education;

Excellencies, Delegates, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to this celebration of ten years of The Commonwealth of Learning. Welcome also to the Pan-Commonwealth Forum, the pretty city of Bandar Seri Begawan and this ceremony.

The aim of this Forum is to:

1. Focus attention on and learn from the exemplary work of Commonwealth institutions in the field of distance and open learning;
2. Bring the attention of Commonwealth scholars and educational policy makers to some of the major educational challenges of our times;
3. Explore the ways and means to increase the capacity and improve the quality of distance and open learning in the Commonwealth; and
4. Help identify, in a practical way, how Commonwealth co-operation and collaboration can be enhanced in this field.

The desire and ultimately the decision to co-host this meeting with the Universiti Brunei Darussalam and the Ministry of Education of Negara Brunei Darussalam is a clear indication of the importance that all of us at COL place in recognising the significant role the Royal Kingdom of Brunei played in the establishment of The Commonwealth of Learning some ten years ago. It is also a symbolic gesture on our part showing our desire to work even more closely with the smaller nations of the Commonwealth where distance education can play an

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important and significant role in increasing human capacity, talent, knowledge and skills to confront the challenges of the new decade ahead.

It is pleasing to note the varied fields of expertise even within open learning represented here among the conference delegates. Besides the experts, many senior Ministers of Education, academics and education administrators have chosen to attend this meeting. We also have individuals from the development community, business and industry, especially those in the ICT areas. All of these suggest to a large measure that we are not alone in focusing our attention on this critical area of educational innovation and application that can be relevant, accessible and beneficial to large parts of the Commonwealth community.

Ten years ago, COL was specifically set up to assist member countries of the Commonwealth to enhance their access to education. Today, despite the high levels of investment into education, there is concern that instead of seeing an increase in access, in many parts of the world doors to education that were more open before are beginning to close. In sheer number there are more children who are out of school today than, say, ten years ago. The situation in the post-secondary sector including the university sector is not much better. Since there is little likelihood of seeing a massive increase in immediate funding for education, those of us in education must look at alternate ways of delivery that will help increase access without necessarily increasing costs. This Forum will examine Commonwealth experience on this and other related questions.

The Forum would not have been possible but for the encouragement, support, advice and contributions of many governments, agencies, organisations and individuals. I wish I could express the gratitude of The Commonwealth of Learning and our co-hosts by naming all of them individually; unfortunately time is not on my side. However, in the limited time that I do have, it would be invidious if I failed to mention the few who, through their support and encouragement, have made this event possible. With your indulgence, Your Royal Highness, let me quickly say how grateful we are to:

- His Royal Highness for the time and willingness to grace this opening ceremony with his presence.
- The Honourable Minister of Education, Negara Brunei Darussalam, and his officials, as well as the many government ministries and departments of this lovely country.
- The Vice Chancellor and staff of Universiti Brunei Darussalam.
- Industry Canada, the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the Canadian International Development Agency.
- The Department for International Development and the British Council, UK.
- The New Zealand Overseas Development Agency.
- The Caribbean Development Bank.
- The Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia.

Without the advice, generosity and sponsorship of all these agencies, this conference would have been that much poorer of the talent and experience we have been able to gather. We also benefited enormously from the constant advice of the chairs of the distance education associations of the Commonwealth. We are also grateful to all of our Keynote and Plenary Speakers, who despite the enormous call on their time have found it possible to join us here in Brunei to share with us the benefit of their knowledge and wisdom, along with the participants from across the Commonwealth.

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Last but not least, we had a wonderful Conference Organising Committee who put up with all of the demands and bad habits of the Commonwealths academic community with such tolerance and good humour.

To all of you and others my very sincere thanks.

I wish all of our participants a very productive and enriching Forum.

Dato Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan
President and Chief Executive Officer
The Commonwealth of Learning

BRUNEI, 2 March 1999