

Study Buddies Across the Commonwealth



University College of the Caribbean, Convocation ceremony, 22 November 2009

Address by Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning

Transcript

President Adams, Members of the graduating class, Members of the faculty and staff, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you, Ms. Boyd, for that stirring introduction. I hope the reality will be up to the advance billing!

I am delighted to be with you today for a number of reasons, but before I go into those let me congratulate the graduates on their achievements, thank their families and friends for supporting them in the studies, and commend the faculty for the diligent teaching and constant encouragement that has brought us to this happy outcome. It is good to have milestones along the road of life and this convocation ceremony is an important milestone in your careers and lives, as well as marking an important step in the development of the University College of the Caribbean.

Ms. Boyd has stressed my commitment to expanding access to higher education. As well as promoting distance learning this commitment has led me, during my time at UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning, to be an advocate for the expansion and multiplication of private university institutions such as UCC. The private sector is now the fastest growing component of higher education worldwide because most of the world's countries will never be able to respond to the demand for higher education from their people without giving the private sector a major role.

It is a pleasure to bring you greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning and from the wider Commonwealth family. When I leave here tomorrow I shall go to Trinidad where the Heads of Government of the 52 nations of the Commonwealth are holding their biennial summit this week.

The Commonwealth is a very special voluntary association of nations and this will be a remarkable gathering of leaders from around the world. The Commonwealth used to be made of countries that had a historic link with Britain but, as its value as international forum has become more widely appreciated, other countries have joined too. Mozambique has been a member since 1995 and in Trinidad this week the other members may accept Rwanda's application for membership of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is special because it is a voluntary association of very diverse states that makes all decisions by consensus. The fact that all members agree to use English in Commonwealth discussions

also makes for easy and frank exchanges. Furthermore, all member states are democratic and committed to the values of equality, good government and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The last time that the Heads of Government met, two years ago in Uganda, they received an important report on how to increase respect and understanding between people. One of the report's key points is that we all have multiple identities. It stresses that we must not let demagogues and rabble rousers paint us into the corner of reducing our complex individual identities to a single characteristic, whether it is religion, race or gender – and then making that one characteristic a pretext for discord.

As the head of a Commonwealth organization I make many visits to Commonwealth countries. What most strikes me is the diversity among and within countries. The Commonwealth includes some of the world's largest nations, such as India, with over a billion people, and some of the smallest, like Tuvalu, an island nation of 12,000 people in the Pacific. Indeed 32 states, two-thirds of Commonwealth membership, have populations that are smaller than the 2.7 million that you have here in Jamaica. Those small Commonwealth states account for most of the world's small countries, so the Commonwealth considers it has a special responsibility to speak for all small countries.

As its contribution the Commonwealth of Learning is helping the small states to develop what is called the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, of which Jamaica is an active member.

This so-called Virtual University is not a new higher education institution but more a human network through which the countries and their institutions work together to create courses in eLearning formats that all can use. As I speak to you today, experts from 15 of those countries are gathered in Samoa to develop course materials about ports and stevedoring. They include two participants from the Caribbean Maritime Institute here in Jamaica.

You also find amazing diversity within the countries of the Commonwealth. India, with its many languages and religions, is a particularly striking case, but so are the countries here in the Caribbean. Your great Jamaican intellectual, Stuart Hall, whom I was proud to have as a colleague for a decade when I was at the UK Open University, has encouraged us to think about our identities in terms of two types of roots. There are our family roots [ROOTS] but just as significant are the different routes [ROUTES] that have brought our ancestors and us to where we are today.

Many in the Caribbean have their roots in Africa and your ancestors were brought here along routes set up by the slave traders. I have visited the centres of the slave trade at the Ile de Gorée in Senegal, at the castles of Elmina and Cape Coast in Ghana, and at Bagamoyo in Tanzania. They are harrowing places that even today are redolent within the misery of the thousands of Africans who passed through their doors.

Many others in the Caribbean have their roots in Asia and came here by a different route as indentured labourers. Then, there is a smaller group whose ancestors were the colonists who came here more or less of their own free will.

Such diversity is potentially a great strength. However, developing a sense of nationhood in countries with people from many backgrounds calls for constant respect and understanding among the individuals with their various roots, who have come together by different routes.

The Secretary-General of the Commonwealth has asked the Commonwealth of Learning to use media and technology to promote this agenda of respect and understanding and I ask for your help. We want to bring together hundreds of YouTube style videos, from young people around the Commonwealth showing how they have fostered respect and understanding or defused conflicts in their own groups and communities.

I noted that Commonwealth Heads of Government are meeting this week in Trinidad. Twenty-two years ago, just as many of today's graduates were being born, the Heads met in Vancouver. Even then people thought that the world was in the throes of a communications revolution. When they met in 1987 the Heads of Government decided that these new media and technologies had so much to contribute to education that they should not be the exclusive preserve of entertainment and business. But they thought that countries might need help in applying technology to education, training and learning, so they set up the Commonwealth of Learning to provide it. That is what we have been doing for over 20 years.

COL, as we call it, is not a teaching institution, nor is it a donor agency. Our role is to help governments and institutions do educational technology for themselves, often by collaborating across borders, as in the case of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth that I just mentioned.

The Commonwealth Executive MBA and MPA programmes that some of you have studied are good examples of COL at work. The idea arose ten years ago when the four open universities of south Asia asked COL to help them develop such a programme. These universities are the Bangladesh Open University, India's Indira Gandhi National Open University, the Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan and the Open University of Sri Lanka.

The programme was first offered in 2002 and for a number of years it was only offered by those open universities in south Asia. More recently, however, it has started spreading around the Commonwealth. In Africa it is being offered by the National Open University of Nigeria and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana.

In south-east Asia it has been taken up in Malaysia by Wawasan Open University, a private not-for profit institution. In the Pacific it is being offered by the University of Papua New Guinea. Finally, here in the Caribbean it is a programme of the University of Guyana as well as here at the University College of the Caribbean.

So the CEMBA/CEMPA programmes began in the big public distance learning universities of south Asia. Therefore I find it particularly interesting that of the nine partners now offering the programme, four are institutions that teach face to face in classrooms, and two are private not-for-profit institutions: UCC and Wawasan Open University.

This shows that good distance learning materials can help to increase access to quality education in many ways. I hope those of you graduating from the programme at UCC are pleased by the idea that you have had hundreds of study buddies working on the same programme in all regions of the Commonwealth. I hope that you will not misunderstand me when I say that the CEMBA programme at UCC has done something to restore the gender balance that seems to be under threat in the rest of the graduating class.

Our goal at the Commonwealth of Learning is to empower people with the learning that enables them to be agents of economic and social development. We want to enable our partner universities to deliver high quality learning and professional development opportunities that complement the existing MBA/MPA

programmes in the participating countries. The CEMBA/CEMPA programmes are designed for part-time study by busy working professionals, in response to the growing demands for post-graduate level education in business and public administration.

The instructional materials for each course were developed by subject experts drawn from around the Commonwealth, not only from the partner institutions but also from universities in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Hong Kong and South Africa. At the moment, following a comprehensive evaluation by a team led by the University of South Africa, all courses in the programme are in the final stages of being updated.

Let me stress two points about COL's role in the CEMBA/CEMPA partnership before I conclude. First, this is not a COL programme. COL is neither a teaching institution nor an accrediting body. Our role is to be a catalyst for collaboration between institutions across the Commonwealth. We act as guardians of the learning material and assist with the administration of the partnership. But this is a UCC programme and UCC is responsible for quality assurance and accreditation. COL simply makes the material available to UCC at a very nominal price.

The second point is to stress that this is a partnership. The nine partner institutions must work together to manage and advance the programme. COL is pleased to service the executive and academic boards that guide the destinies of the CEMBA/CEMPA programmes but all institutions must get involved and play their part in those structures and in keeping the courses up to date.

I know that UCC is fully committed to that. For example, one of your instructors, Ms Chavel Green, recently played a very active part in a workshop that was held in Bangladesh on the writing of case studies. As a result of that workshop one hundred new case studies will be developed for the programme by the middle of next year, so your successors in the programme will benefit from a very rich bank of case studies from across the Commonwealth.

In summary, I am proud that the University College of the Caribbean has the chance to take part in a very 21st century approach to higher education. By using good learning materials, prepared in a global perspective, your instructors here are able to concentrate on helping students understand and apply the concepts to real business situations in your local environment.

But, of course, in our fast-changing world this, like all other endeavours, is a work in progress. I am sure that everyone at UCC will have learned much from taking this first cohort of graduates through the course. Future cohorts will benefit from improvements inspired by your experience as guinea pigs. The aim is see that the programme, like the businesses in which you are involved, is a self-improving system.

So I end where I began. I congratulate all the graduates and their families and, most particularly this first cohort to complete the Commonwealth Executive Master of Business Administration or Master of Public Administration degree. I wish you well in your future endeavours and thank you for letting me share this happy occasion with you.