

Access and Success: What are the Links?



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

*Kochi, Kerala, India
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Opening Remarks

*Sir John Daniel
Commonwealth of Learning*

Professor Swaminathan, The Honourable Burchell Whiteman, Professor Pillai, Professor Ramanujam, Representatives of UNESCO, UNICEF, the Commonwealth Secretariat and other intergovernmental organisations, Ladies and Gentlemen.

As President of the Commonwealth of Learning it is my great pleasure to welcome you to Kochi. I am delighted that the Chairman of COL's Board of Governors, The Honourable Burchell Whiteman, is here with me on the platform and that two other members of our Board, Ms Jenny Glennie and Ambassador Miriam Katagum are here with us too.

As the Chief Executive of COL I am extremely fortunate to have a Board which is highly committed to our work, and a brilliant and dedicated international staff, all of whom are here too. I greet you also on behalf of my COL colleagues who were not able to come to Kochi but who have worked tirelessly to ensure the success of this event and the many pre-conference workshops and meetings.

For many of you this will be your first experience of a Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, because we direct most of our sponsorship funds to support those delegates who have never been to a PCF before. I offer a special welcome to you. These forums are part of a tradition at COL that goes back to PCF1, held in Brunei in 1999. From there we moved around the Commonwealth: PCF2 in Durban, South Africa in 2002, PCF3 in Dunedin, New Zealand in 2004, PCF4 in Ocho Rios, Jamaica in 2006 and PCF5 in London in 2008.

In each case COL works with a local partner and I am delighted to thank our partner for PCF5, the University of London, for being a sponsor of this event too. Our partner for PCF6 is the Indira Gandhi National Open University, the Commonwealth's largest university. It is a pleasure to thank Professor Pillai and his staff for the energy they have devoted to bringing this event together, noting especially the tireless work of our Programme Chair, Professor Ramanujam.

We are deeply honoured that Professor M. S. Swaminathan has agreed to be the honorary chair of the conference and look forward to his address. COL's motto – the statement that defines our work – is *Learning for Development*. I can think of no one in the world who exemplifies that statement better than Professor Swaminathan. A distinguished agricultural scientist, who gave India the world the developmental benefits of the green revolution; he has always been equally concerned with the social and individual implications of scientific advances. Much of the work of his foundation is aimed at helping people learn their way to better livelihoods in changing times.

Given this close match between his philosophy and COL's work it is not surprising that two of COL's senior international staff, Dr. Balasubramanian and Dr. Balaji, once worked with the Swaminathan Foundation.

Over ten years since PCF1, these conferences have acquired a reputation as the leading forum for the discussion of the nexus between learning and development, with contributions that explore both the theory and the practice of how education, training and learning generally can contribute most effectively to development. All of you will now take that tradition forward and your deliberations will be an important input into planning COL's work for the next triennium from 2012 to 2015.

Some of you have been involved explicitly in consultations on our next Three-Year Plan and I thank you for giving of your time for that purpose. Many more of you have been involved in the many pre-conference events that have just been held. Three were held elsewhere: the inaugural conference of the Commonwealth Open Schooling Association in New Delhi; a workshop on ODL at the State Resources Centre in Trivandrum; and the biggest meeting of all, just over the Tamil Nadu border in Bodinaikanur, where 6,000 women farmers who are stakeholders in our Lifelong Learning for Farmers initiative came together to present their recommendations on how best to combine learning and rural credit in the furtherance of development.

Here in Kochi we have had workshops and meetings on teacher education; Child Friendly Schools; the use of community media in development; technical and vocational skills development; the use of Open Educational Resources; and the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth. I thank all of you who came early for those events and hope that you found them stimulating and useful.

All those themes and more come back in the very full programme that we have put together from your own papers and proposals. Our theme is *Access & Success in Learning*. This reflects our conviction that it is no longer enough – and it never was enough – to pride ourselves on the role of open and distance methods in widening access to learning. We must judge our efforts by the success of those who engage in the learning that we facilitate. I mean success not just in gaining the certification on offer, but in using their new skills and knowledge for the development of themselves and their communities.

Our work here is grouped under four themes. What are the keys to making the link between access and success in learning in each of them? Here are my own hypotheses, based on my participation in the pre-conference events for your critical assessment in the coming days.

Regarding community development I suggest that the key concept is *participation*, by all members of the community in all steps of the process. In striving for social justice, it seems to me that the key is to link learning firmly to the wider economic and social *systems* in which people live. Success in skills development has the same requirement, added to which it is essential to achieve *relevance* particularly, in our context, to the informal economy in which so many of our fellow citizens work. Finally, in the area of

formal education and making the assumption that the content of learning is appropriate, then the key is to get people to *engage with that content*, something to which technology can make a major contribution.

I invite you to test those hypotheses against your own experience as you work within the themes of our conference on *Access and Success in Learning: Global Development Perspectives*.

Finally, COL is not only looking ahead to its next planning cycle, but also to PCF7. We have not decided on a venue for that conference and we invite expressions of interest from institutions or organisations in being our partner for that event. Talk to me or one of my colleagues and we will follow up with you.

I again welcome you to this impressive gathering, thank our partner IGNOU and our international and local sponsors such as the National Institute of Open Schooling, and wish you an exciting time in Kochi. I hope that access to PCF6 will lead each of you to greater success in implementing learning for development when you get home.