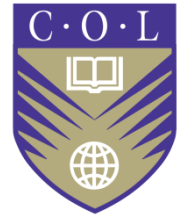


# *Access to Learning for Development*

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*Launch of the 5th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, University of London, 17 May 2007*

*Access to Learning for Development*

*Remarks by Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning*

## **Introduction**

It is a great pleasure to be here with our colleagues from the University of London to participate in the launch of the 5th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. I am particularly delighted that my former UNESCO colleague Dr Abdul Khan was able to give the keynote address. He and I were appointed Assistant Directors-General at UNESCO at the same time at the end of the year 2000 but our links go back longer than that. We have both led open universities, he in India, me in the UK, and we have both worked for the Commonwealth of Learning. Today UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning are working together to harness information, communications and educational technologies to development. I thank him for his inspiring words.

The Commonwealth of Learning is delighted to be working with the University of London to put on the 5th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning here in London in July next year. Let me begin with a few words about the Commonwealth of Learning before I talk about the Forum itself.

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

Twenty years ago, in 1987, the Commonwealth Heads of Government held their biennial meeting, the CHOGM, in Vancouver. Two streams of thinking converged at that meeting. Canada wanted to see the Heads of Government take an initiative that would encourage their countries to make greater use of communications technologies in education. Meanwhile, arising out of the work of the Commonwealth's Standing Committee on Student Mobility a report had been prepared, under the leadership of Lord Briggs, entitled *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning*. It argued that although the physical movement of students between countries was constrained by rising costs, it was increasingly easier to move courses between countries using distance learning formats.

With India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi taking the lead, the Heads of Government decided to create a new intergovernmental agency, funded by voluntary contributions from Commonwealth governments,

called *The Commonwealth of Learning*. India and Nigeria both pledged hard currency contributions to the new organisation.

After the CHOGM was over I was greatly honoured to be asked to chair a planning committee whose task was to make precise recommendations to governments about the aims and methods of the Commonwealth of Learning. At the time I was serving as President of Laurentian University in Ontario and I was joined on the committee by distinguished representatives from governments and educational institutions around the Commonwealth.

The key question facing the planning committee was the classic choice: give people fish or teach them to fish. Should the Commonwealth of Learning develop courses and programmes and use technology to share them around the Commonwealth, or should it help countries develop their own capabilities for using educational technologies and expanding distance learning.

The committee opted for the second approach and so recommended to Commonwealth governments which, in 1988, signed a Memorandum of Understanding formally creating the Commonwealth of Learning. Ever since then COL has been helping developing countries and their institutions to harness educational and communication technologies to education, training and learning generally.

This covers many types and levels of education and learning. We are helping farmers in India to achieve their vision for a more prosperous village by bringing them the information they need to make their agriculture more productive. We call this *Lifelong Learning for Farmers*. We are helping ordinary people in all parts of the Commonwealth to avoid disease and live healthier lives by equipping and training their Non-Governmental Organisations to use the mass media of TV and radio to communicate health messages. We call this *Media Empowerment*.

We are helping the campaign to achieve Universal Primary Education by showing institutions how to scale up quality teacher education by distance learning. We are addressing the consequences of achieving Universal Primary Education by helping countries develop alternative approaches to secondary schooling to cope with the tidal wave of children headed in that direction. We call that *Open Schooling*. We continue to help universities develop their capacity to operate at a distance, in some cases through eLearning.

Finally - and I have only given a sample of our activity - we are making it possible for the Ministers of Education of 28 small states of the Commonwealth to achieve their vision of a *Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth*, which is a vehicle for the collaborative development and delivery of postsecondary courses in support of development goals.

COL does all this with a total staff of 40: 35 at our main office in Vancouver and 5 at our unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia. Our 15 senior staff members are recruited internationally across the Commonwealth and serve on rotation.

Although we all travel extensively we do not attempt to do all this through bilateral contacts alone. We are enthusiastic proponents of south-south cooperation and we draw on an extensive network, or Diaspora, of experts and colleagues around the Commonwealth. We might send a Namibian expert to

train people in the Caribbean in eLearning, or an Indian expert to show Nigeria how to create an open school.

I imagine that it was this tradition of south-south cooperation and our need to sustain a vibrant Commonwealth-wide network of professional and academic expertise in technology-mediated learning that led us to launch this series of Pan-Commonwealth Forums on Open Learning.

## The Pan-Commonwealth Forums on Open Learning

They began in Brunei in 1999, followed by Durban, South Africa in 2002, Dunedin, New Zealand in 2004 and Ocho Rios, Jamaica last year. You will notice that with these locations the series of PCFs, as we call them, processed nicely around four Commonwealth regions: Asia, Africa, Pacific and Caribbean. That left only one region, Europe, and so I was delighted when the University of London offered to host PCF5 next year.

The Commonwealth of Learning also felt immensely privileged by Sir Graeme's offer because it linked PCF5 to the University of London's celebration of the 150th anniversary of its External Studies Programme. The launch of this programme in the mid-19th century was a seminal event in the development of two phenomena that are front and centre for all universities today: distance learning and cross-border provision.

As I noted earlier, COL will celebrate in 2008 the 20th anniversary of the commencement of its operations. With these two anniversaries to commemorate we are sure that the stars will be perfectly aligned. We are already delighted with the tremendous teamwork that has developed between my COL colleagues and the outstanding organising committee that the University has put together.

## PCF5

Last year, I entitled my remarks at the closing of PCF4 in Jamaica, 'The Road to London'. We're already nearly halfway there, but we should think of PCF5 as a milestone, not a destination. The processes of debate and discussion on technology-mediated learning are a continuous activity for COL and its Commonwealth-wide network. As in Jamaica, the conference topics will be a blend of subjects directly related to COL's current three-year plan, which has the title *Learning for Development*, and themes identified by the delegates themselves through the papers that they submit.

We are holding this launch event this evening, a year ahead of the Forum, in order to encourage the education and development communities in London and the UK to engage in this process at the earliest opportunity - so that by the time the Forum convenes here in July next year, from every corner of the Commonwealth, we shall all be ready to engage with the conference themes in a purposeful and decisive manner.

It is rare to hold this type of Commonwealth gathering in London, and even rarer to choose a venue such as the University of London, which is an international hub for research and action on education,

development, medicine and the social sciences. These two factors will give PCF5 much greater reach, breadth and depth than its predecessors.

I am delighted that Abdul Khan's lecture this evening will explore the role of the universities in achieving the internationally-agreed development goals. That aligns perfectly with the overall theme of PCF5, which is *Access to Learning for Development*. COL believes that development in all sectors is fundamentally a matter of learning but observes that traditional approaches do not give enough people access to the opportunity to learn in support of their own development. The core purpose of PCF5 is to help people find better ways to increase the scale, scope and quality of learning for development.

We have identified four development themes in particular: Health; Livelihoods; the provision of Education and Training for Children and Young People; and finally, the role of technology-mediated learning in addressing issues of Governance, Conflict and Social Justice. You will find more about the framework of the programme in your packs.

## What You Can Do

I hope this information will inspire you to get involved in PCF5. You can contribute in one of more of the following ways:

- Putting forward proposals for papers, workshops, symposia and other events during the conference: the call for papers begins today.
- Helping with the practical planning and preparations to welcome the Forum to London. The planning team are here tonight and are based in Senate House.
- Thinking about how you might take advantage of having this Commonwealth-wide community of experts in development and learning technologies in London. The PCF5 team awaits your ideas.
- Sponsoring delegates - the Commonwealth embraces some of the poorest and the richest countries on the planet. We have ambitious sponsorship targets that we must achieve in order to ensure that the people who need to be at PCF5 can get here. At a minimum, we aim to sponsor fully at least one in six of the delegates and to keep the conference fee below \$500 to make it affordable for all and great value for all. We are delighted to announce tonight that the University of London and the Open University have already made commitments to ensure places for 40 delegates from sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the small island states.

Details of all this are in your pack. The creation of the External Studies Programme at the University of London was a seminal event in expanding access to higher learning around the world, most especially in what is now the Commonwealth. We believe that PCF5 will also be a seminal event in demonstrating to the world how new approaches can make possible the mass learning that is the key to development.

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