

Opening Remarks: PCF9

Professor Asha Kanwar

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It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the 9th Pan Commonwealth Forum.

Let me pause here for a moment to pay tribute to the courage and resilience of our friends in The Bahamas. Our thoughts and prayers are with them and we would like them to know that we are here to support their efforts to rebuild their education systems affected by Hurricane Dorian. They are not alone!

As we meet here in bonnie Scotland, I can't help but think of its great poet Robert Burns and I quote: "*From scenes like these old Scotia's grandeur springs, that makes her loved at home, revered abroad.*" And our 550 participants from over 60 countries will be certain to carry home first hand reports of Scotia's grandeur!

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The road to Scotland has been long, passing through several Commonwealth countries over the past 20 years. The pan Commonwealth forums are held in partnership with different institutions and three years ago we met in Kuala Lumpur, thanks to the Open University of Malaysia.

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Let me thank our host institution and forum partner - the Open University UK – for bringing us together in this iconic city, as they mark their fiftieth anniversary. As a formidable leader in open and distance learning, as a model for many open universities around the Commonwealth, I can think of no better partner for PCF 9. Our connection with the Open University goes back to the time when your chancellor Lord Asa Briggs wrote the report that led to the establishment of COL. Your former vice chancellor Sir John Daniel strengthened those early foundations as COL's president and raised the organisation's profile internationally. Lord David Puttnam, your former Chancellor continues the tradition by making very valuable contributions as a member of our Board of Governors.

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As you know, COL was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987, which makes us a bit over thirty and definitely the younger of the two partners. Ever since, we have been in beautiful British

Columbia, which makes us the only Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation outside the UK.

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Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to education and training.

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COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. And we do this through innovative uses of technology and replicable models.

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This aligns closely with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 which aspires to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

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Will this goal be achieved by 2030? UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016 indicates that on current trends, the targets relating to primary, secondary and tertiary education will only be met several decades after the due date.

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If we are to achieve SDG4 by 2030, we need to move beyond the 'business as usual' approach and the 'brick and mortar' mindset which assumes that learning is only possible within the walls of a classroom. We need alternative and innovative approaches to address the magnitude of the challenge.

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The status of education in the Commonwealth is equally dire. We need to provide access to additional 17 million primary school children and 16 million youth who are out of secondary school. While more boys than girls are enrolled in primary schools, boys are underrepresented and underperforming at the secondary level in many Commonwealth countries.

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Which is why the theme of PCF 9 is 'Innovations for Quality Education and Lifelong Learning'. Let us look briefly at the four sub-themes.

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The first is equity and inclusion. There is a great deal of disparity in the education of boys and girls. In several developing Commonwealth countries, girls in rural and resource-poor communities spend on an average only 1 or 2 years in school as compared to 9-12 years of schooling that urban and wealthy boys have in the same countries. Last year at their meeting, Commonwealth Heads of Government called for 12 years of quality education for each girl—how can we ensure that no girl is left behind?

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What of people with disabilities? Globally, 186 million children with disabilities have not completed primary school. The situation is worse in developing countries where 90% of the children with disabilities are out of school. In the tertiary sector access is no better. Canada has 11% access for people with disabilities while Australia has just over 5 % in tertiary education. In developing countries such as South Africa, the percentage drops to 1% and to .56 % in India.

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Access to tertiary education is seen as a path to development. Globally the GER in tertiary education is over 37%, but many developing Commonwealth countries are still struggling at below 15%. How can we open up access to quality education?

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The costs of tertiary education are beyond the reach of many families in countries as diverse as Japan, China and India. How can we reduce costs without compromising quality? In which ways can we harness the potential of Open and Distance Learning and Open Education Resources (OER) to make tertiary education more affordable?

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Convinced that higher education leads to higher earnings and social mobility, most governments have invested heavily in higher education. But even where there is increased access to tertiary education, it is not a passport to employment. Half the youth surveyed by a McKinsey report were not sure that their post-secondary qualifications would lead to a job—58% employers did not believe that new graduates were well prepared for work.

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The Commonwealth is young with 60% of its population under the age of 30. Youth unemployment in some Commonwealth countries is exceptionally high. The global youth unemployment average is nearly 13% in many Commonwealth it is well over 40%. What do we need to differently to make our youth ready for employment and entrepreneurship?

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Technology could be one way forward. But there is an uneven development in connectivity and infrastructure across the Commonwealth. 35 % of the Commonwealth population have internet connectivity and 88% have mobile subscriptions. But even today the costs of data in many developing countries is way beyond the reach of the average learner.

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How can we use technology to covert the digital divide into a digital dividend? In his analysis of the networked society, Castells (2009) has shown that the network-making power operates on the basis of two mechanisms: the ability to constitute and program networks and the ability to connect and ensure cooperation. Many important stakeholders of education may be far beyond this network-making power due to regional, gender, class and ethnic factors. It is obvious that Africa, South Asia and Latin America may have limited potential in network-making power. These types of power play a major role in the inclusion-exclusion of various stakeholders.

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Since we have explored the challenges and opportunities of the four sub-themes, let us return to the main theme of the forum—innovations for quality education and lifelong learning. How do we achieve quality education? The World Bank states that the world is facing a learning crisis and even when children are in school, over half of them may not be learning. In West and Central Africa, less than 45% of Grade 6 students achieved competency level in maths and reading. Similarly, in South Africa, the majority of Grade 4 students could only demonstrate the capacity of those in Grade 1. This is common in many Commonwealth countries. While education is at the centre of building human capital, over half the world's children are not equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in an increasingly demanding and uncertain world.

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Given the magnitude of the challenge, lifelong learning is no longer an option but an imperative for sustainable development. We need to provide access to primary, secondary and tertiary education, skill and re-skill people for the future of work and cater to the needs of the third age.

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We need to consider some questions. As we seek to achieve quality education and lifelong learning for all how will we implement and measure lifelong learning? Is literacy a sine qua non of lifelong learning? Since most of us are from the formal education sector, what are the mechanisms for integrating formal non-formal and informal learning for lifelong and lifewide learning?

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From the very beginning open and distance learning has catered to the needs of lifelong learning through its flexible and learner-centric approaches. There are 31 open universities and hundreds of dual mode institutions in the Commonwealth—what is our role in strengthening access to lifelong learning and contributing to a learning society?

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Fifty years ago, ODL was a disruptive innovation. Clayton Christensen defines disruptive innovation in business as a process whereby a smaller entity with fewer resources is able to successfully challenge established players and displace incumbent businesses by addressing a specific need that had hitherto not been addressed. If we use Christensen's disruptive innovation model in higher education, we find that open and distance learning (ODL) was the real innovation at the bottom of the pyramid that challenged mainstream face-to-face higher education and catered to marginalized and unreached constituencies. MOOC, another form of distance education embraced by top-tier research universities is now disrupting traditional distance education. How can we reclaim our leadership and special niche in education and lifelong learning? What is the next frontier?

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This brings us to the bottomline for this PCF—we are not simply discussing access to education and learning—but how education and learning can lead to individual, social and sustainable development. What innovations do we

need? Innovation can become a cliché if we do not raise the questions, “innovation for what” and “innovation for whom”? We need to contextualise innovation in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals and the needs of our Commonwealth. The focus must be on transformative learning, which leads to the 3 Es: economic growth, equity and environmental conservation.

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I urge you to focus on some of the key questions that need our collective creativity, such as: (1) How can governments and institutions best develop and integrate lifelong learning into education systems, curricula and practices? (2) What is the role of technology in promoting quality education? (3) How can we create a culture of innovation within our educational institutions to promote sustainable development?

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This forum promises to be a feast of ideas and innovations. The point is how we can translate these into solutions and actions that will make a difference to the last person in the queue. Thank you for travelling long and short distances to be here with us. Once again, welcome to PCF9.