

Thank you, Malaysia



Commonwealth of Learning

*Regional Meeting of the Focal Points
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
29-30 October 2008*

*Remarks at the Opening Ceremony
by Sir John Daniel*

Your Excellency Dato Seri Mohamed Khaled bin Nordin, Minister of Higher Education of Malaysia; Focal Points and Representatives from 17 Commonwealth countries of the Asia-Pacific region; distinguished representatives of the Malaysian education and higher education sectors; colleagues; ladies and gentlemen.

Your Excellency, we are greatly honoured by your presence with us and I ask you to pass on to your colleagues in the Government of Malaysia the warm thanks of the Commonwealth of Learning for your generous support of this meeting of our Focal Points from the Asia-Pacific region.

The Commonwealth of Learning was created 20 years ago by Heads of Government as an intergovernmental organisation of the Commonwealth. Over the last few years, in order to strengthen our vital links with the Member States, we have created a network of focal points in all Commonwealth countries by asking Ministers of Education to designate someone to liaise with COL on a regular basis. This Commonwealth-wide network of focal points is proving to be a tremendous asset to our work.

This year, as we prepare our next Three-Year Plan for the period 2009-12 that will be presented for approval here in Kuala Lumpur in June next year at the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, we are using our network of focal points as our principal means for consulting the Commonwealth about what it needs from COL in the coming years.

Accordingly we held a first meeting of the focal points for the Caribbean Region in Jamaica in March. To our delight every country was represented and, as well as giving COL a very clear fix on regional priorities, the participants found it a most enriching experience for their professional development. Thus encouraged we brought the African focal points together in Malawi in May and, apart from two colleagues whose visas were delayed, we again had a full house.

Instead of holding separate meetings for our focal points from the Pacific and from Asia we decided to bring them together and we are deeply grateful for the support that Malaysia offered for holding the

meeting here. Once again, I am thrilled to say that all countries are represented. These seventeen countries are a wonderful microcosm of the diversity of the Asia-Pacific region. I simply note for example, that we have with us representatives from the Commonwealth country with the smallest population, Nauru, and that with the largest, India.

Malaysia is an ideal venue for this meeting. First, this country has been a consistent supporter of the Commonwealth of Learning, it is very active in the Commonwealth generally, and will be hosting the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers here next year.

Second, Malaysia has been a leader in the vigour of its educational development and the innovations it has made in policies and structures. Minister, COL helps countries with developments all levels of education, training and informal learning, but let me concentrate here on your area of responsibility, higher education.

Malaysia is resolute in expanding access to higher education to meet the needs of a knowledge society and is unique in the way that it is accomplishing this through a blend of public and private institutions working together. In particular, you have been pioneers in the particular area of COL's focus, open and distance learning, with the creation in the last decade of the Open University of Malaysia and the Wawasan Open University.

Both are unique. The Open University of Malaysia is a private institution that has the public universities as its major shareholders. This is a brilliant way of bringing these two sectors together and we much admire the dynamism of OUM and the way that it is engaging with the latest technologies.

I am delighted to tell you that at its 5th Pan-Commonwealth Conference on Open Learning, held earlier this year, the Commonwealth of Learning made the distinguished Vice-Chancellor of OUM, Tan Sri Anuwar Ali, an Honorary Fellow of COL. Two weeks ago, at the Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities held in China, Tan Sri Anuwar Ali and I signed a Memorandum of Understanding aimed at enrolling students from across the Commonwealth in OUM's training programme in instructional design for eLearning.

I am pleased to add that OUM is also working with our Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in developing Internet radio, especially for use in the Maldives.

I offer the same plaudits for innovation and dynamism to Wawasan Open University, the world's first private open university, and to its distinguished Vice-Chancellor, Tan Sri Gajaraj Dhanarajan, who was also my predecessor as President of COL. Wawasan Open University is a leader in a pan-Commonwealth network of universities that offer the Commonwealth Executive MBA programme that was developed by a consortium of universities here in Asia.

Minister I am pleased to say that we shall be showing our colleagues from the Asia-Pacific region some of your achievements in higher education by taking them to visit OUM and the Universiti Tun Abdul Razak on Friday. We are delighted that your Ministry is also working with the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia by taking the lead in developing quality assurance indicators for multi-media materials. This is a world first.

Malaysia's strong engagement with multi-media and eLearning is especially relevant to this meeting of our Focal Points. Those from the Pacific and the Maldives are engaged in building the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, a collaborative network for creating eLearning courses for use across the small states and beyond. All work, such as that in Malaysia, that underpins the professionalism of the eLearning community is very relevant to our work with this Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

Minister, since the 16th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, held in South Africa in 2006, there have been discussions about the implementation of a proposal that was made there for the creation of a Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility. The aim of this facility would be to help Commonwealth countries with the challenges of expanding higher education and improving its quality.

Since COL is already extensively engaged in such work we made an offer to lead in the establishment of such a unit. However, when we learned that Malaysia was interested in taking on that role we withdrew that offer and said that we would do everything possible to help Malaysia develop the Facility instead. Minister, I am pleased to reaffirm that intention here and to wish you well as you prepare your proposal for the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers to be held here next year.

That meeting of Ministers, 17CCEM, is a most important event for COL since these meetings of Ministers, held every three years, receive a report from COL and decide on the approval of our next Three-Year plan. That Three-Year Plan will, of course, reflect the conclusions of this meeting of Focal Points about the priorities for COL's action in the coming years. Because of the importance of 17CCEM we shall hold our COL Board meeting here in Kuala Lumpur in June next year to coincide with the presence of all the Minister of Education from the 53 countries of the Commonwealth.

Minister, I thank you for being with us this morning and I thank you for your generous support of this meeting. I wish you success in driving forward the exciting developments in higher education in Malaysia and I look forward to seeing you again when COL returns to Kuala Lumpur next year.