

Presentation to the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education



Presentation on behalf of The Commonwealth of Learning

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Mr. President, Mr. Director-General, Excellencies, Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am greatly honoured to represent The Commonwealth of Learning on behalf of its President, Dato' Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan, and I thank you for the opportunity to address the Conference.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an Intergovernmental Organisation established in 1987 by the Commonwealth Heads of Government. (For the sake of clarity I should perhaps make it clear that COL relates to what was formerly the British Commonwealth rather than to the Commonwealth of Independent States).

COL is a small agency which works on behalf of member states across all sectors of education from basic literacy to continuing professional education. But it has its origins, and a good deal of its continuing commitment, directly in higher education. When Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Vancouver, Canada in 1987, considerable concern was expressed about the consequences for international student mobility of the decision by several traditional 'host' nations to establish full cost-recovery fees for overseas students. It was decided that (and I quote) "if fewer students can travel to the courses then courses must be taken to the students".

In this way COL's mandate was established - to use the methods of distance education and associated

technologies to assist member Commonwealth countries, and more particularly developing Commonwealth countries, to meet the expanding demands they faced, and continue to face, for access to quality education and training.

In fulfilling its mandate in higher education sector COL has operated essentially as a 'broker' agency to establish bilateral and multilateral linkages by means of open and distance learning. In the course of the past 10 years COL has worked directly in more than 40 Commonwealth countries, partly in direct response to requests from Governments, their agencies and institutions and partly through initiatives designed to foster international collaboration.

In the very few minutes available to me I want to mention in summary four very current higher education projects which are, I believe, indicative of the ways in which international cooperation in distance and open learning can deliver high quality and cost effective educational opportunities for the 21st century:

1. The Canada-Caribbean Distance Education Scholarship Programme

A 5-year programme funded by the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade provides Scholarships for certain Caribbean based undergraduates to study 'at a distance' with certain Canadian higher education institutions. The project commenced in September 1998.

2. The Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme

100 students from 15 developing countries are enrolled in a 2-year Masters in Distance Education programme from Indira Gandhi National Open University, India and a number of them have recently graduated. The skills acquired will have direct application in enhancing educational opportunities for others in their home countries.

3. The Commonwealth Master of Business Administration/Master of Public Administration Programme

Cooperation, initially involving the four national Open Universities in the subcontinent is aimed at the development in the course of the next year or two of an MBA/MPA degree by distance education which would be affordable for people who do not have access to the sponsorship of large employers.

4. Distance Training in Legislative Drafting

Good government demands good laws, well drafted by trained draftspersons. Until recently training for small jurisdictions has meant extended overseas study. A pilot of a distance education training course, just completed, has involved trainees from 14 Commonwealth countries. This training course will now also be offered on a regional basis in the South Pacific, Southern Africa and hopefully other locations.

A significant number of interventions at this Conference have pointed to the importance of distance and open learning methods and their associated technologies in meeting the challenges faced in higher

education as it approaches the 21st century. On the basis of its experience over the past 10 years, COL endorses those perceptions and looks forward with confidence and enthusiasm to participating with others in meeting the challenges and opportunities ahead.