

Opening Session ICDE Conference



M-2009 OPENING CEREMONY

Sunday, June 7, 2009; 1600–1800 hrs, Maastricht, The Netherlands

By Professor Asha Kanwar

Opening Ceremony

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am Asha Kanwar from the Commonwealth of Learning, and I am Chair for this afternoon's proceedings. As I stand here, I sense that you share my great expectations about the next few days – most of us have travelled a long way to be here and want the travel to be worthwhile; others have travelled a shorter physical distance, perhaps, but one thing is certain: we are all here to learn from each other! And then, there are our hosts for whom this is the culmination of many months of arduous preparation. On behalf of the conference organizers, "Welcome to Maastricht!"

There is much to stimulate our interest over the next few days. First, M-2009 combines the bi-annual global International Council for Open and Distance Education Conference and the annual European Association of Distance Teaching Universities Conference. But contributing to the excitement as well is the venue of the event. We are coming together here in Maastricht, this quintessential European city that is known for its confluence of history, culture and internationalism. And it is especially exciting to be here when Maastricht has been nominated to compete for the title of the European Capital of Culture in 2018. Even though we are going to focus on open and distance education and the use of virtual means of communication for achieving learning—the real world in which the deliberations take place impacts significantly on the discussions themselves.

The choice of Maastricht as the site for the conference resonates in other ways as well: for the linguists and historians among us, Maastricht's name derives from the Latin *Mosae Trajectum*, meaning "Mosa-crossing", identifying its earliest beginnings as the town next to the bridge the Romans built across the Meuse River – the bridge that connected the town with the wider world. It is appropriate, then that M-2009 - takes place here, for it builds a bridge between and within countries and continents. The open learning and distance education community from around the world is here today and what is discussed over the next few days will shape the discourse of distance education globally.

This also happens to be the 23rd ICDE conference. The first one took place way back in 1938. What did we discuss at the previous events? In 1998, a scholar, Ellen Bunker, in looking for an answer to this question, concluded that five recurring themes emerged. She observed that the distance educators were committed to:

1. increased access to education;
2. quality which is on par with the traditional system;
3. research-based practice;
4. international representation, and
5. the role of appropriate technology.

Do we respond to these themes today? Of course we do!

The theme of this conference “Flexible Education for All: Open – Global – Innovative” captures all five strands identified by Ellen Bunker, but with a difference. These are abiding concerns but they now are located in a more contemporary frame – that of the Education for All goals, the expanded meaning of the word ‘open’ within the context of Open Education Resources, the reference to our globalized world and to education transcending borders, and, finally, to the innovations made possible by creative developments in technology – and the innovative uses of that technology.

Just as distance education broke the traditional mould of how people learned, this conference is shifting our perceptions of how music relates to the structure of an academic conference. We hope that in a similar way there will be major breakthroughs in our thinking during the course of this conference. It is time now to introduce the musicians and to invite them to play for us.

Music During the Session

As I have already mentioned, M-2009 is a double bill: two conferences in one, which bring together the vast resources and networks of both the ICDE and the EADTU

I invite the Heads of each of these two organisations- first, the ICDE President **Frits Pannekoek** (President Athabasca University, Canada), followed by the EADTU President **David Vincent** (Pro Vice-Chancellor UK Open University,) to offer a welcome and brief remarks from their respective organizations to focus us on the tasks ahead,.

Welcome

Thank you, for those generous words of welcome and those rich insights, gentlemen. We have heard from two distinguished leaders from two of the great open universities of the world.

Now, it is my privilege to invite Dr. Renk Robourgh, Director General Higher Education, Vocational Education, Science and Emancipation, to deliver the first keynote on behalf of the Honourable Ronald Plasterk, the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Roborgh:

Keynote Address I

The Minister’s keynote draws our attention to one major trend that has emerged in the last decade. It is collaborative course development using Wikis and other technology tools. The OER movement provides

a unique opportunity to developing countries to access and to influence global knowledge flows. The second trend from the developing world perspective, is the increasing use of distance education for secondary schooling. In this decade the main focus has been on the goal of achieving Universal Primary Education (MDG 2). But what happens when students graduate from elementary school? Can existing schools absorb the large numbers? Open schooling can address the challenges of increased demand by reaching out to diverse groups of learners with quality secondary education that offers both academic and technical and vocational options.

UNESCO has been at the vanguard of the Education for All initiative. Technology has been a valuable ally in our efforts to scale up access to quality education and training. No one understands the interface between education and technology better than UNESCO's Assistant Director General for Communication and Information. Many of you will know him in a former incarnation as the Vice Chancellor of the Indira Gandhi National Open University. As ADG UNESCO since 2001, Professor A.W. Khan provides global leadership for standard setting, policy formulation, and for harnessing the power of information and communication technologies for social and economic development. Please welcome our next keynote speaker Professor Khan.

Keynote Address II

Thank you. Professor Khan's address highlights the third key trend that has emerged in this decade. ODL is now embraced as a tool for development and has gone beyond strengthening systems of formal education. Of the 1.1 billion people living on less than \$1 a day, 75% live in rural areas and rely on agriculture for food and income. ODL can contribute to poverty reduction (MDG 1) by the development of skills training packages for poor communities. My organization, the COL has developed an initiative to promote Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) .Such projects help us to deploy distance education in creative ways.

Speaking of creativity, it is significant that, 2009 has been declared the Year of Creativity and Innovation by the European Commission. We were looking forward to hearing directly from the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth Mr. Jan Figel himself, but as Professor David Vincent has already explained, he, unfortunately, could not send in the video.

Music

Thank you. I'm sure you'll agree with the great European composer, Ludwig van Beethoven, that, "Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy."

From Europe let us now turn to Asia and to the Shanghai TV University. As we all know Shanghai TV university is one of the great mega-universities of the world. When the COL president Sir John Daniel coined the term 'mega universities' in 1994, there were eleven mega-universities in the world with a collective enrolment of about 3 million students. Today the number of mega-universities has doubled and student enrolments have tripled. This demand for higher distance education is anticipated to increase exponentially during the next decade.

It is in this context that the next message is critically important. Let me now invite the Vice President/Academic Professor Chen Xin to present the Shanghai message from the 2008 ICDE meeting of Rectors and Presidents on behalf of Zhang Deming, President Shanghai TV University, China.

Shanghai Message

We will now have a short musical interlude followed by an introduction to the Programme by the Chair Prof Fred Mulder, Rector of our host university, the Open University of the Netherlands.

Music

Introduction to the Programme

Thank you. Since it is an international audience, I'd like to flag a fourth key trend that has emerged over this decade. While the number of open universities has remained stable in the developed world such as in the Netherlands and the UK, it has grown phenomenally in the developing world, particularly India, China and the African continent. In 1988, there were 10 open universities in the Commonwealth. Twenty years later in 2008, there were 27! Six African countries are planning to establish open universities in the next three years.

While this development addresses the theme of access so dear to the distance educator's heart, what implications does this have for 'quality', another recurring concern for us all? The programme will no doubt provide us with ample opportunities for further discussion.

Thank you. With that, we come to the end of this inaugural session. Thank you all for your patience and attention.