

Commonwealth Universities: What Contribution to Development?



Commonwealth Universities: What Contribution to Development? Presented at the: Association of Commonwealth Universities, Kerala, India, 4 April 2005

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be with you and an honour to be invited to address this ACU Council meeting. For me being at an ACU event again is something of a homecoming. I spent 17 years as a university vice-chancellor: six at Laurentian University in Canada and eleven at the Open University in the UK.

I well remember that when I moved to Laurentian in 1984 I had barely got my feet under the desk before I received a call from that great ACU figure and former Honorary Treasurer, Professor Tom Symons, whom John referred to this morning. Tom pointed out to me that Laurentian was one of only a few Canadian universities not in membership of ACU and suggested that I should correct that - which I did.

During the rest of my time at Laurentian and then the decade at the UK Open University, I found the ACU congresses and meetings of executive heads the most useful, effective and well organised international gatherings that I attended. I got to know well the previous two secretaries-general, Chris Christodoulou, whom I knew previously from his association with the UKOU, and Michael Gibbons. I am looking forward to working with John Rowett and we have made a good start.

My association with the ACU never led me to the distinction of being a member of the Council. However, I am with you today because there is a reciprocal agreement under which the Secretary-General of the ACU is an observer on the Board of the Commonwealth of Learning, and the President of COL is an observer at the ACU Council. This seems to me an excellent arrangement and we look forward to welcoming John to our board meeting in Vancouver in June. I feel privileged to have observed this very important meeting of the ACU Council.

What is the Commonwealth of Learning? Briefly, we are one of three intergovernmental agencies of the Commonwealth, the other two being the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation,

both based at Marlborough House in London.

The Commonwealth of Learning was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver in 1987. Canada and British Columbia won the subsequent competition to host the organisation, which means we are the only Commonwealth intergovernmental body - and one of the few Commonwealth bodies of any kind - that is not headquartered in the UK. From this standpoint I strongly endorse John's remarks about the need to make the ACU multi-centric

I stress that COL is not a teaching institution but a technical assistance agency. I stress that because in the run-up to COL's creation some wanted it to be a University of the Commonwealth, beaming courses by satellite to people around the Commonwealth. However, the Planning Committee, which I had the privilege of chairing whilst I was president of Laurentian University, decided that it was more important, if you will allow me the metaphor, to teach countries to fish rather than giving them fish.

Our purpose, therefore, is to help countries use technology, particularly the demonstrably successful technology of distance learning, to improve the scope, scale and impact of their education and training systems or, more generally to make the opportunity to learn more widely available to the people of the Commonwealth. One of our primary mechanisms for doing this is cooperation within the Commonwealth, particularly south-south cooperation.

One important aspiration of the founders of COL, which will be implicit in my later remarks, was to create a situation whereby: "...any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth".

That will serve as an introduction to COL. John invited me to talk to you today about the role of Commonwealth universities and the role of the Commonwealth of Learning in development. I am delighted to do so and will intertwine the two themes rather than treating them sequentially. You will learn more about the detail of COL's work as I go along.

My title is Commonwealth Universities: What Contribution to Development?

Why the Interest in Development?

I begin by asking simply: why should you be interested in development? For some of you, particularly those from Africa with long memories, the term development may have a bitter taste. That is because, in the 1980s and well into the 1990s, as we noted this morning, many development agencies, led by the World Bank, at best depreciated the role of universities in the development of Africa and at worst were actively hostile to expenditure on higher education.

This led, fairly directly, to the decline in the intellectual acuity and physical infrastructure of Africa's universities that is now so widely lamented. Those African academic leaders who remember that era will have been used to going onto the defensive when the word development was mentioned, fearing that they had to protect their budgets and status from further depredations.

So I begin by observing that those days could now be over. That does not mean that the damage to African universities has been repaired, but it does mean that repairing the damage is high on the international agenda. The ACU, under the leadership of John Rowett, will be called to play an important role in re-energising the universities of the developing world and I was delighted to see your endorsement of that commitment.

Proof that the days of depreciating the contribution of universities to development are over comes from several sources. The World Bank has for some years been preaching the need for balanced attention to all levels of education. UNESCO, to its credit, has always urged the importance of universities and has been a forum in which ministers from developing countries can promote their role, as at the World Conference on Higher Education of 1998 and its sequel in 2003. African ministers have been vocal in protecting UNESCO's the higher education budget.

At the national level the discourse has changed dramatically, as evidenced by the key role accorded to universities in the recently published report of the UK's Africa Commission and the robust statements by African and Asian leaders such as President Mbeki of South Africa, President Obasanjo of Nigeria and President Kalam of India.

International agencies and national governments have come back to the idea that the development and advancement of universities is a contribution to national and international development. That's the good news.

However, referring back to this morning's discussion, I do find, in my discussions with development specialists, that there is deep scepticism about whether governments and institutions will spend additional money on higher education in an effective and forward-looking manner. This is partly because they think that the higher education enterprise is in hock to vested interests.

In the next minutes I shall talk a bit about the contribution to development of the growth and improvement of universities per se.

I shall talk first, however, about the role of universities in the narrower development agenda that is expressed most clearly in the Millennium Development Goals - the MDGs. This is where I shall make the links with the Commonwealth of Learning, because one of the themes of my leadership of COL is to tie our work more explicitly to those goals.

Most of you will be familiar with the eight MDGs so I will give the background only briefly. They were articulated at the turn of the Millennium at the largest meeting of heads of government ever held at the United Nations. The world's leaders made a Millennium Declaration, which called on countries and international bodies to act more decisively in the 21st century to improve the lot of the majority of humankind, so many of whom had ended the 20th century in appalling conditions of poverty, hunger, ignorance and ill health.

Systems have been established to ensure follow-up to the declaration and to monitor progress. Since most of the goals set targets for palpable improvements to be visible by 2015, mid-term evaluations are under way and you will have heard of the report recently published by the Monitoring Unit, headed by Jeffrey Sachs, which argues that a large increase in development aid can have a crucial positive impact on progress towards the goals. The UK's Africa Commission takes up the same themes and the UK government intends to make them a major agenda item for the G8 Summit this year.

One way and another, we shall hear a lot about development this year and that is the context for my remarks.

The Millennium Development Goals

So what are these goals? What is the Commonwealth of Learning doing? What can Commonwealth universities do to help their achievement?

Poverty and Hunger

The first Millennium Goal is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, specifically to halve the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and those who suffer from hunger. What are the critical obstacles to the attainment of this goal?

At COL we consider that fighting hunger and sustaining a liveable environment means empowering millions of farmers and smallholders and giving the masses in the rural areas of the world more control over their lives.

There is a real divide to bridge here. Many organisations, including many Commonwealth universities, conduct research on agriculture and try to share the results.

The most difficult bridge is the last mile to the individual farmer.

This is not just a matter of packaging information in an attractive way, such as through a radio soap opera, and pushing it at the farmers. Communication operates in two directions and the first step is to help farmers and smallholders define their own needs. Step two is to enable agricultural extension workers, through dialogue, to match these needs to real possibilities.

This is the basis of our programme of Lifelong Learning for Farmers in some of the villages of Tamil Nadu - I shall be driving from here to one of them on Thursday. It is based on four principles.

The first is to work with the farmers and villagers to make them aware that life could be better and to help them articulate demands for information that could help them improve the rural economy. The challenge is that those demands tend to be formulated in a pragmatic and holistic way that does not necessarily correspond to the way that those who have the information structure it.

So the second principle is to get organisations, notably universities, to work together in consortia so that they can respond to such holistic requests. The example near here is a consortium of the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, the Tamil Nadu University of Veterinary and Animal Science, the Tamil Nadu Open University and Anna University, which is very strong in Engineering. Instead of each institution sending its specialist extension people into the villages in an uncoordinated manner, they work together to answer the real questions from real people.

Principle three is to use technology, such as the ICT kiosks now present in many villages, or community radio, to speed up and extend the process of information exchange. The fourth and final principle, because the overall aim is to improve the rural economy, is to get the banks involved and to favour commercially operated ICT kiosks, since the farmers are happy to pay to access information if it is genuinely useful to them.

Our aim in all this is to produce a dynamic that is not only self-sustaining but self-replicating. The process must be so obviously beneficial that people copy it spontaneously.

The lesson for universities is clear. It is simply to pay more attention to the channels through which their good work on research and teaching, in this case in Agriculture, can reach those who really need it. For most poor countries development must include the improvement of the rural economy and helping the millions of farmers and smallholders who are the backbone of that economy.

Primary Education

The second Millennium Development Goal is to achieve universal primary education so that by 2015 all boys and girls complete primary school. This is the most fundamental of the goals because, as Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen argues, development is freedom and education is the royal road to freedom.

The major bottleneck to the achievement of universal primary education is the training and retraining of tens of millions of teachers. Universities have a crucial role in teacher training so the implications here are straightforward, which is not to say that the task is easy.

In our own parish, the Commonwealth, there are 20 million teachers. Many of them need further training to be effective. Millions of new teachers must be recruited and trained as countries seek to expand education with a teaching force that is shrinking through retirement, migration and AIDS. Most agree that conventional methods of teacher training are not up to the scale of the challenge.

However, this is an area where open and distance learning has already proven its effectiveness for training teachers in many countries. One of the staples of COL's work is to help universities and teacher training colleges to become, in the jargon, dual mode institutions, that is to say institutions that operate both at a distance and in the classroom. I am sure that many of your universities are engaged in this process.

The divide we have to bridge is to equip existing teacher training institutions and individual teacher educators to deploy new methods and to network themselves into professional communities. One of our

projects at COL is the formulation of pan-Commonwealth quality assurance indicators for teacher education.

Gender

The third Millennium Development Goal addresses gender disparities, the first aim being to eliminate disparities between boys and girls in primary and secondary school by next year. The second, even more demanding, goal is to achieve gender equality, meaning equality of outcomes, by 2015.

In this case the divide that COL and others are working to bridge is the gender gap in the use of ICTs. We now have a good fix on the barriers that women face in using ICTs and have worked with others to make this a prominent issue in the World Summit on the Information Society.

In this area, as in many other areas of development, one of the challenges is a knowledge divide. Using its advanced expertise in knowledge management, COL maintains a virtual library of resources and documents on gender equity that has been developed in collaboration with the Forum of African Women Educationalists. You can find it at www.colfinder.org/dev.

Most universities can be proud of their contribution to gender equity. Many universities, in both developed and developing countries, now have a majority of female students, and this is particularly true of the newer open universities. Moreover, in nearly all countries women are now outperforming men in universities.

Indeed, the underperformance of boys is a particular problem in the Commonwealth, notably in the Caribbean and southern Africa. For this reason COL is focusing some of its effort to promote gender equity on the boy problem rather than the girl problem.

Health

The next three Millennium Development Goals all target health. One is to reduce infant mortality by two-thirds in the next ten years, the second is to reduce by three-quarters the ratio of women dying in childbirth in the same period, and the third is to halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and malaria in particular.

The achievement of such goals depends on the improvement of health services and universities clearly have a crucial role here.

However, achieving the goals also depends on making it possible for people to learn how to avoid disease and how to keep themselves and their children healthy. This means giving them access to information that they can understand: not just because it is presented in their own language, but because it is rooted in their culture - even if it challenges some of the habits of that culture.

The best way to bridge that divide is to equip and train people to produce the information themselves. We

call that Media Empowerment and that is what the Commonwealth of Learning is doing through its partnership with the World Health Organisation.

As well as training local WHO representatives to expand the impact of their work by using the techniques of distance education, COL has, for example, equipped and trained an NGO in Kwazulu Natal Province of South Africa so that it can make videos to reach much greater numbers with health information and training, notably about the problem of HIV/AIDS stigma.

Similarly, mobile units with projectors and generators use radio and television to deliver information about malaria to the villages of Sri Lanka. On a wider scale COL is producing open source radio content with messages of importance to poor people about filtering domestic water and growing food in the cramped conditions of urban poverty. These will be available in various languages.

I know that some Commonwealth universities are doing outstanding work in raising health awareness on campus, especially awareness of HIV/AIDS. COL has found that the notion of peer health educators is particularly powerful. This involves training a number of students from all disciplines, and preferably equal numbers of men and women, to spread messages about healthy practices across the institution. We at COL would be pleased to work with universities, using the principle of media empowerment, to multiply the impact of these peer health educators on and off campus.

Environment

Millennium Goal Seven addresses the question of environmental sustainability directly. Here COL is helping institutions in India to develop a whole range of specialised courses in an open and distance learning format. These address directly some of the crucial issues for environmental sustainability, such as municipal water and waste management and solid waste management.

These courses are based on a big investment that COL and UNESCO made in the 1990s to produce teaching material on the environment that was scientifically sound and pedagogically effective. This is now being versioned in various ways and we should be pleased to share it with other Commonwealth universities that may be interested.

Global Partnership

Finally, the eighth Millennium Goal calls for a global partnership to improve governance, to make the benefits of ICTs more widely availability and to give particular attention to the needs of landlocked and small island developing states. Such states are particularly vulnerable to natural calamities, as we have seen in the recent spate of hurricanes raging through the Caribbean, and they usually have a very narrow economic base.

Here I should mention an initiative of the ministers of education of the small states of the Commonwealth dating from 2000, which they are calling the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. The aim is for small states to work together on technology-based learning materials so that they do not

always have to rely on importing educational resources from larger countries. We can come back to that in the discussion.

Here again COL's aim is to help states use technology to achieve their education and training objectives. Across the Commonwealth more widely, the aim is to take learning to scale, whether it be the training of the hundreds of thousands of people now being asked to play a role in local democratic councils in India, or the difficult challenge of equipping disaffected male school dropouts in the Caribbean with usable life skills and occupational skills.

In democracy and governance the universities of the Commonwealth have a proud record. Democracy is a fundamental requirement for Commonwealth membership. The shared traditions of law, language and learning that make the Commonwealth a unique association of states have allowed the its universities to play a particularly important role in nurturing democracy, sustaining the rule of law and promoting good governance.

I said at the beginning that development specialists now have much more positive views of the value of universities. An important reason for that is their growing conviction of the importance of democracy and good governance in development and the realisation that universities fan the flame of democracy and produce the trained professionals who make good governance possible.

Challenges and Opportunities for Commonwealth Universities

Those are my comments of the Millennium Development Goals. Let me conclude with some remarks about the general development of Commonwealth universities. Some of you may be aware of the work of the Indian-American academic C.K.Prahalad that is summarised in his book *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*. I believe that his observations should stimulate reflection amongst university leaders.

Addressing himself to multi-national corporations, Prahalad points out that there are four billion poor people at the bottom of the world economic pyramid who aspire to better lives. He urges multinationals to look at globalisation strategies through a new lens of inclusive capitalism since, 'for companies with the resources and persistence to compete at the bottom of the world economic pyramid, the prospective rewards include growth, profits and incalculable contributions to humankind'.

Looking at these four billion people through the lens of higher education, we note that if they were to achieve an APR in higher education of 35% there would 150 million additional students to serve, far more than total current enrolments worldwide. Higher education would, however, face the same challenge as businesses in serving this clientele.

It would require 'radical innovations in technology and business models'; changing from the ideal of "bigger is better" to 'an ideal of highly distributed small scale operations married to world-scale capabilities'; and 'helping people improve their lives by producing and distributing products and services in culturally sensitive, environmentally sustainable and economically profitable ways'.

Business has found that it requires multiple partners to operate successfully in this environment. Likewise higher education providers would need partnerships with local government authorities, communities, NGOs and financial institutions.

One development, however, is providing massive help to both business and education in serving the poor. The growing availability of telephone and Internet connections is uniting the world's rich and poor and transforming the digital divide into a digital dividend.

Communication links are altering dramatically the way that poor villages in the developing world function. There is a huge opportunity for HE providers, including cross-border providers, to develop new business models and bring education to millions.

By establishing economies of scope they would be able to reach out to the Bottom of the Pyramid and achieve economies of scale.

As Prahalad says 'We have proved to the world that if you build a market for the rich, the poor wouldn't participate. If you build a market for the poor, the rich would participate'. Just as cheap shampoo sachets and brand names can appeal to the poor constituencies, low-cost, high quality and need-based education can reach out to the millions that live below the poverty line but still aspire to education and training for a better future. Costs are critical in developing economies and this is an area that providers need to address.

New Technologies for Cross-Border Education

Fortunately, a series of developments in the use of technology promise to make possible the dramatic reduction in educational costs that is required. These developments combine steadily widening access to information and communications technology, which we call connectivity, with new ways of using connectivity in education. I refer not simply to eLearning, but to the blossoming of the Free Open Source Software movement and its application to eLearning.

Institutions wishing to introduce eLearning now have available a range of open source Learning Management Systems (the term for software platforms that support eLearning). Even more importantly, teachers and institutions around the world are creating and sharing learning materials and courses for use on these platforms, known generically as 'reusable learning objects'.

The combination of expanding connectivity and the growing reservoir of open educational resources is a revolution (see, for example, www.col.org/lor). Previously the use of technology in developing countries resulted in a transfer of wealth to the developed world: the rich got richer and the poor became poorer. Those days could soon be over.

This is not the place to explore in detail how greater connectivity allied to open educational resources could reduce the costs and expand the availability of education. Suffice it to state my conviction that this is the route by which higher education could be opened up to the billions of people at the bottom of the pyramid.

Much of this work will, rightly, be done by local providers. However, such a huge market will most likely spark a massive expansion in cross-border provision. For this reason it is of interest to universities in both the developing and developed countries of the Commonwealth.

This is not the place to expand on the phenomenon of cross-border higher education, which was the subject of an address that I gave to the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education in New Zealand last week. At the moment, cross-border education is numerically insignificant in developing countries. I believe that cross-border providers should work to make it more significant so that they can help the poorer countries expand their higher education systems.

Fortunately UNESCO and the OECD have just produced some excellent guidelines for good practice in cross-border education, which provide a point of reference for both providers and receivers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that the time is propitious for Commonwealth universities to make a more self-conscious contribution to development, not merely through the steady expansion of their core business of teaching and research, but also through work directed at the helping the most disadvantaged of our fellow human beings in the framework of the Millennium Development Goals.

Thank you for inviting me to address you and I look forward to strengthening the links between COL and the ACU.