

Opening Ceremony Address: Tenth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning



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Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the 10th Pan Commonwealth Forum. What a privilege to see the Commonwealth right here in Canada. The formal inauguration is tomorrow –in this session we will set the context for the Forum with insights and wisdom from four eminent panellists.

But first let me pause here for a moment to pay tribute to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, who was the Head of the Commonwealth for 70 years. When COL was formally inaugurated, Her Majesty offered ‘a hearty welcome to this new and significant element in the fabric of the Commonwealth’, established to foster ‘Commonwealth cooperation in distance education as an important practical step in cementing relationships between members’. Loved and respected for her sense of duty and dedicated service, Her Majesty’s legacy will endure. Let us observe a moment’s silence to honour her memory.

The road to Calgary has been long, passing through all regions of the Commonwealth over the past two decades. The pan Commonwealth forums are held in partnership with different institutions and three years ago we met in Edinburgh, where The Open University, UK was the host.

Let me thank our host institution and forum partner – Athabasca University – for bringing us together at the gateway to the Rockies. The theme of our Forum is ‘Innovations for Educational Resilience’ – why are innovations and resilience so important today?

Covid-19 has caused the biggest disruption of education in human history where over 95% students worldwide were impacted. The world has seen plagues, world wars, famines –but never before a disruption of this magnitude. The challenge of Covid-19 has provided us with an opportunity to rethink how we can build more resilient education ecosystems to both survive and thrive in the face of future crises.

The climate crisis is one of the defining issues of our times, particularly for the Commonwealth, with its 32 small states. More than 3000 classrooms and over 330,000 students were affected when Cyclone Idai hit Mozambique. Hurricane Dorian destroyed 90% of the infrastructure in The Bahamas. The tsunami in Tonga and the floods in Pakistan have caused further devastation.

The global community had committed to SDG 4 – ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning for all by 2030. Even before the pandemic, all targets were not on course and now with only 8 years to go, there has been a further set back due to the pandemic.

How can we prepare for unforeseen crises and fast track progress towards achieving development goals?

As we know crisis generates creativity. During the pandemic, we saw a flowering of innovative approaches to reach the last mile – whether it was through community radio or free SIM cards, WhatsApp or delivering massive open online courses through basic mobile phones.

These are all examples related to technology. But innovations are not about technology alone--they can relate to products, processes, models, methods – even external relations.

We also need to ask – innovations for whom and innovations for what? Its not enough to have an innovative pilot project – how can we achieve scale? How ethical are our innovations and what will be the impact on people and the planet?

The agriculture sector is one of the most disaster-prone – and have developed an Agricultural Innovation System. This not only focuses on products but also on knowledge, involving the active participation of various stakeholders and building local capacities to face major challenges such as famines and starvation. Putting innovative systems in place and building capacity provide the environment for innovations.

What can the education sector learn? Involving stakeholders such as parents, teachers and the labour market and fostering their participation would enable the transformation of creativity into innovation.

What can we learn from business? 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 not been addressed.

If we use Christensen’s disruptive innovation model, we find that innovations that target the bottom of the pyramid and meet the needs of a learning society can challenge mainstream education and build a resilient system that caters to marginalized and unreached constituencies.

Let us review the four sub-themes.

The first is Building Resilience where we will hear from Dr Christina Kwack, a well-known social scientist, who has been working on climate change and education for over two decades.

Meanwhile, let me share the highlights of an online discussion on this sub-theme. Participants believed that national and institutional ODL and OER policies should be adopted to build resilient systems where the impact must be evaluated on an ongoing basis.

The second sub-theme is 'Inspiring Innovations' and we have already explored some of the different dimensions of innovations. This will be addressed by Maxim Jean Louis, himself an innovator and pioneer in educational technology.

The online discussion forum proposed adopting new and emerging technologies such as AI, AR/VR for education; tailor targeted solutions to meet the needs of small states and integrate a green learning agenda in education.

As we know lifelong learning is no longer an option but an imperative for sustainable development. We need to skill and re-skill people for the future of work and cater to the needs of the third age. This sub-theme will be addressed by Dr Joanna Newman a distinguished academic and leading Commonwealth educationist.

Participants of the online forum believed that technology could play a key role in promoting lifelong learning. Micro-credentials, recognition of prior learning and mobility of qualifications would need an innovation mindset and lead to resilient systems.

Promoting Equity and Inclusion is a subtheme that underpins all of COL's work. Only 66% countries have achieved gender parity in primary education, and persons with disabilities continue to remain outside the educational mainstream. Dr Dianne Chambers, an expert in special and inclusive education will address this topic.

One of the main insights from the online discussion was that there could be no quality without equity. Not only must there be a proactive approach to developing policies for equity and inclusion but there must also be enough resources available for effective implementation.

Do we need an educational innovation framework? MIT developed an innovation framework in partnership with Latin American countries which has a strategic and an operational perspective. The strategic dimension is the context in which the innovation takes place, the needs of the stakeholders and the purpose of education. Operational elements include the methods and structure.

Over the next three days, we could discuss what an educational innovation framework would look like for us. Such a framework could enable us to effectively deal with issues of learning loss, sustainable education and resilient systems that can withstand future disasters.

With that, let me first invite Dr Joanna Newman