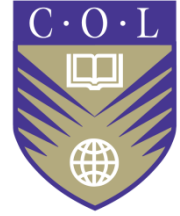


Remarks to the Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting



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On behalf of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), I send you greetings. While I wish that a representative could be here in person to deliver these greetings, a meeting of our Board of Governors prevents us from doing so.

This meeting of our Board of Governors is timely because we will be presenting to them our strategic plan. Once the Board has approved our overall strategy we shall work with each Commonwealth country to decide what COL can most usefully do in that country in the next three years. And as we also engage many of you in your capacity as Minister of Education, you shall have the opportunity to comment on our plan when we meet in Cape Town at the end of this year.

We have recently had the opportunity to meet with colleagues from Commonwealth Youth Programmes in London and from the Caribbean Centre to discuss their aspirations for the use of information and communications technology and open/distance learning in the delivery of its Diploma and Certificate programmes. The relationship with Commonwealth Youth Programmes began in 1998 with the development of the original materials for the Certificate and Diploma programmes. We were pleased to provide the technical expertise and instructional design guidance and to watch how this programme has taken hold and expanded across the Commonwealth.

CYP and COL share a similar challenge that motivates our work: recognising that conventional methods of education and training simply cannot meet the massive need for learning in support of development. In our recent conversations with CYP, it became clear that we agree that technology is transforming other areas of life and it is time to use it to improve radically the scope and scale of learning.

We also share similar aims: to empower people with the learning that makes them agents of development. According to Amartya Sen, development and human rights are two sides of the same coin. Development

means simply expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Sen also points out that freedom is also what makes development happen. It is primarily through the free agency of people that development is achieved. Free people devote more energy to the development of their families, their communities and their countries than those who are not free. The expansion of freedom is both the primary purpose and the principal means of development. What kinds of freedom are we talking about? We can distinguish between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'.

The first freedom from is freedom from hunger. You cannot concentrate on much else if you worry constantly where your next meal is coming from. Hunger is a direct manifestation of poverty. Taking people out of abject poverty helps to free them from hunger and gives them other freedoms as well, notably some freedom from being pushed around by others and from having most of life's decisions made for them.

The second freedom from is freedom from disease. It is hard for people to fulfil their potential if they are constantly sick. It is hard to develop a community if its members are constantly sick.

The next freedom is the freedom to live with a minimum of dirt, smoke and germs. There seems to be a paradox here. In rich parts of the world individual people consume more than their share of the earth's resources but live in nice clean environments with fresh water in the taps, clean air to breathe, and no piles of garbage to trip over. In developing countries individuals make fewer demands on resources but often have to live besides heaps of garbage, breathe foul air and make do with dirty water.

I'm sure that you can think of other 'freedoms from', but there are also 'freedoms to'. The freedom to be treated as an equal to other members of society, especially the freedom for men and women to be treated as equals. There is the freedom to be educated, the freedom to choose who governs you, the freedom to express yourself, and the freedom to practice your religion. No doubt you can think of more 'freedoms to' as well, but this list of 'freedoms from' and 'freedoms to' begins to define what we mean by 'development'.

The challenge is to express these freedoms as concrete aims that we can work towards. Both Commonwealth Youth Programme and the Commonwealth of Learning do this by bringing together several international frameworks of goals.

First, there are the Millennium Development Goals, which set targets for progress towards freedom from hunger and poverty, freedom from disease, freedom from pollution, the freedom to be equal and the freedom to be educated. Defining the freedom to be educated was taken further in the Dakar Goals of Education for All, or EFA. There are six goals for EFA, which cover all levels of education from early childhood to adult learning and skills training. Finally, a number of the other 'freedoms to' are embraced in the key goals espoused by the Commonwealth: the freedom to live in peace, the freedom of democracy, the freedom of equality before the law, and the freedoms that flow from good governance. COL defines its work by combining these three frameworks.

We feel that distance education has a huge role to play in moving the development agenda forward and there are many manifestations of open and distance learning. COL works with its partners to find models for using technology that meet at least three criteria.

First, we look for, or develop applications of technology that are scaleable. The whole point of using technology is to create learning opportunities for many more people. Nearly all development goals require very large numbers of people to learn new things. Conventional face-to-face teaching cannot be scaled up to meet the challenge. Technology is only useful if it can be scaled up.

Second, we want models for using technology that are sustainable. That means the technology must be robust, it must be suited to the environment, and its maintenance and updating must not have to rely on external funding.

Third, it must be locally organised. To begin with, this helps to achieve the goals of scalability and sustainability. Anything that depends on outsiders will be limited in impact and inherently fragile. Local people must take responsibility. This also ensures that the use of technology and the messages and learning that it transmits, will be culturally and linguistically appropriate. You might also say that it nurtures another 'freedom from' - freedom from donor dependency.

Those three goals are essential but we try to aim for a fourth, which is to create a model that is self-replicating. I mean that the application is so obviously effective and powerful that people copy it spontaneously. Both COL and CYP are small agencies that can only act in a very few places. But if people copy the models we put in place we can have a big multiplication effect. COL is not concerned with who gets the credit; we simply want to scale up learning for development. And we are delighted to see how CYP has used the application of ODL to such a great effect: the CYP Diploma in Youth Work is delivered in more than 40 Commonwealth countries through partnership with 27 Universities and training agencies.

The kind of development that both COL and CYP are seeking is development that increases human freedom in many dimensions. The condition for developing those freedoms is a massive increase in human learning. Conventional methods of teaching are not up to the task. Commonwealth nations have the opportunity to harness the potential of ODL to advance development.

Learning is the common wealth of humankind. Our task is both to increase that wealth and to ensure that is not the private preserve of favoured individuals or institutions but indeed the common wealth of humankind. We have enjoyed a productive relationship in the past with CYP and we look forward to enhancing and deepening that relationship over the next three years.

In closing, I would encourage you to engage with CYP through the Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment and in turn the young people in the Commonwealth. COL certainly plans to do the same.

Sir John Daniel
President & Chief Executive Officer