

# *Breaking New Ground in Open Learning*

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*Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth  
2nd Strategy Meeting for Interlocutors and Institutional  
Managers*

*Singapore  
10-13 April 2006*

*Closing remarks*

*Presented by  
Sir John Daniel  
President & CEO  
Commonwealth of Learning*

It is a great pleasure to be with you. I should have liked to be here all week, because what you are doing is truly ground breaking in world terms. However, duty called me to the South Pacific where our colleague Jenny Williams arranged some excellent meetings with the Government of New Zealand, who are very strong supporters of COL and its work in small states.

From there I went to Papua New Guinea, which is now interested in re-joining this Virtual University network. I was there for the re-launch of the PNG Association for Distance Education and found a very strong consensus, amongst ministers as well as ODL practitioners, that distance learning is the only answer to many of PNG's challenges of education, training, and community development.

I spent part of yesterday in Adelaide at the conference of the Executive Heads of the Association of Commonwealth Universities. In my speech to the conference I talked about this meeting and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. One of my themes was that the growing availability of connectivity and the use of Open Educational Resources could be a leap forward in the availability of postsecondary education and training.

I suggested to the ACU that we have already seen three generations of Open Educational Resources. First there was the MIT Open Courseware project, which puts the lecture notes of MIT Faculty on the web for the information and inspiration of instructors around the world. This made a big splash and put OERS on the map. However, because they are essential professors' notes, they are primarily of use as a benchmark for other professors.

You could argue that the second generation of OERs will be led by the UK Open University, which is going to put quantities of its self-instructional materials on the web with the aim of helping developing countries have a richer environment of learning resources. This will be another breakthrough, since these carefully designed materials will be of direct use to students as well as to teachers.

I told the ACU that I believed that you, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, are the beginnings of a third generation of Open Educational Resources. You are innovating in two ways. First, you are developing materials collaboratively between many countries. This is a new and remarkable development. Second, you are sharing these materials freely with the purpose of their adaptation to each country's needs built in from the start.

I note in passing that the pioneers of each of these three generations of OERS have been funded and encouraged by the Hewlett Foundation. I pay tribute to the Hewlett Foundation's vision of the huge difference that Open Educational Resources can make to access to education and training and to the quality and relevance of those learning opportunities. You are at the forefront of the implementation of that vision and you must not let the vision fade.

So my primary message to you is that you are engaged in something very important. The Ministers of Education asked for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth in order that the small states could catch up with the eWorld. Yet by implementing successfully what you have agreed at this meeting you will be leading the eWorld, not running behind to catch up.

This enterprise must succeed and with your dedication and diligence I know that it will. There is tremendous strength, in both moral and practical terms, in a joint venture of more than twenty countries. The Virtual University network enables you to do something together rather than receive various forms of aid separately.

I do understand that you are so accustomed to dancing to the desires of donors that taking charge yourselves will not come easily. But take charge you must.

The Virtual University is not donor driven development. COL is not a funding agency. We realise that developing courses and materials will require money and we shall work with you to obtain those funds. However, it is the funding requests from you as a collectivity, not a funding request from COL, which will move the hard hearts of funding agencies. Our collective ability to secure that support will be directly proportional to your commitment to the project and to the way that you follow up on this meeting.

We at COL, as Paul and Asha have explained, will rapidly feed back to you the conclusions of your work this meeting in the form of an action plan and the establishment of the Advisory Committee. I'm afraid that you will also find that COL becomes a rod for your backs in driving the activities that must be carried out if we are to meet the goals of your Ministers and the conditions of our support by Hewlett.

I said a 'rod for your backs'. The word rod provides a nice acronym that I ask you to remember as a summary of what it required from you.

R stands for RESPOND! This programme is based on effective communication. You must respond promptly to messages about the follow-up work, not just from COL but from colleagues in other

countries. We have already seen that some countries that initially said they wanted to participate in the work fell by the wayside simply because they did not respond to e-mails. Now that we are getting operational those who do not respond will simply play themselves out of the game.

R also stands for RESOURCES. You will need to be assertive and creative in getting funds to take part of this. I said that our collective ability to raise funds will depend on your commitment to the network. You will also need to raise funds at the local level and you must not be shy about this. The Virtual University has captured the imaginations of Ministers and others. Where there is a will there is a way.

O stands for OWNERSHIP. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is your project. COL did not invent this idea. It was your Ministers in 2000 and again in 2003 who decided that they wanted to get a grip on the eWorld by acting collectively as small states rather than always depending on the crumbs from the big states' tables. When you find the demands of the Virtual University increasing, as they will, remember that you are doing this for yourselves, your institutions and your countries, not for COL. We shall help in every way we can but it is your project: development without donors.

O also stands for OBJECTIVES. Those of you who have done a Ph. D. know that the first challenge is to avoid taking on too big a topic. There is an American saying that more than three objectives is no objectives. Set yourselves modest but achievable targets for module and course creation and then achieve them. Make sure that each module you create is a brick that can be part of a larger wall.

That relates to the question of QUALITY. Whatever you do, do well. One good module is better than two mediocre ones. Learning Object Repositories have a lot of poor quality material in them. You must see that material developed in the framework of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth quickly acquires a reputation for quality.

D stands for DEDICATION. Making a success of the Virtual University is going to require serious commitment from all of us. Few important developments can be achieved without such dedication. One manifestation of dedication gives a second 'D'. Meeting DEADLINES is vital in any serious project, but it is doubly important in a collaborative venture involving multiple players in different countries. A project can only move as fast as its most dilatory member, so please make sure that you are not the weak link in the chain. COL will be there cheering, cajoling and encouraging, but the work is yours, not COL's.

So, that is the ROD for your backs: R means RESPOND to messages and get RESOURCES.

O means that you must OWN the Virtual University; but make it work by setting achievable OBJECTIVES and achieving them.

D reminds you that the VUSSC requires DEDICATION and that one way of showing it is to meet your DEADLINES.

There are two other actions and attitudes that I urge on you. First, keep your governments informed and onside. COL is an intergovernmental agency. Beyond the COL Board my boss, as President of COL, is the Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education representing the 53 states of the Commonwealth. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is the creation of the

Ministers of the Small States, with the strong encouragement of those from the big states. Keep your Ministers informed of progress.

I found in a visit to the Caribbean in February that this Virtual University network has really captured the imagination and interest of ministers, so capitalise on that.

Next, always remember that this project is based on collaboration and sharing. Sometimes national, institutional and personal interests can get in the way of collaboration but you must not let that happen here. The Ministers created the Virtual University as a collaborative effort of small states because they believed that most small states did not have the critical mass to tackle the eWorld individually. Furthermore, it is the collaboration and sharing that makes you unique and that makes you pioneers, because the new concept of Open Educational Resources embeds the notion of sharing. Never forget that you are contributing to an enterprise that is based on sharing, adaptation and sharing again. This means you must ensure that your material has creative commons licences and that you avoid using copyrighted material from third parties.

There will be times when you have to fight for that commitment to openness, but fight you must, because if material cannot be shared and adapted we are wasting our time.

Finally, remember that is a collaborative venture but it is not a new institution. This is what I said when I opened the first of these workshops in Singapore last September.

*"In the spirit of the 21<sup>st</sup> century I suggest that it will be a network rather than an institution - a network with multiple nodes of activity. We are not trying to create a new institution with its own brand name but to find ways to reinforce the institutions and the developments that are already taking place in your countries. A common theme of the responses of ministers to my request to tell me about their priorities was the ambition of strengthening their existing post-secondary institutions."*

So it is through collaboration that you will strengthen your institutions and the eCapability of your countries.

That is enough of a sermon from me. I end by expressing my very warm thanks to all of you for participating in this event, some of you at very short notice. I hope that you have enjoyed yourselves, as well as working hard - and I hope you continue to enjoy yourselves as you engage with the work of creating the Virtual University in the weeks and months ahead. I am sure you will enjoy it, because there is always a special thrill at being at the cutting edge of a new trend.

I also thank, very warmly, the Government of Singapore, which has quickly come to share your and your Governments' enthusiasm for this project and which has been a wonderful host. I also thank, on your behalf, the Director and his colleagues at here at the National Institute for Education, who now feel like partners in the Virtual University and have been enriched by your presence.

I thank and offer my very best wishes for the hard work ahead. Something unique and very important is being created here. The world is watching you. I know that you can do it and COL is here to help you. Our very name proclaims our belief that Learning is Our Common Wealth. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth can become a powerful expression of that principle.