

# *Introduction to the Report to the Commonwealth Senior Officials Meeting*

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*by*  
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*Chairman*  
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As Chairman of The Commonwealth of Learning, I speak to you not as someone paid to sing this song, but as a volunteer who believes that COL is an acknowledged contributor to one of the world's great revolutions - the revolution of knowledge!

Founded in 1987, and established in 1988 in Vancouver, Canada, COL is now celebrating its 10th Anniversary which will culminate in Brunei Darussalam during the first week of March 1999 with a Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. Co-sponsored by COL, the Ministry of Education of Brunei, and the University of Brunei, the Forum will assist in charting our course for the beginning of the 21st Century, and is being preceded by a series of "virtual conferences" across the Commonwealth.

Our brief history has been characterised by two contradictory pressures:

- first, the enlarging demands upon us for services in support of distance education and open learning, particularly with an information technology base; and
- second, the struggle to acquire financial resources adequate to meet those demands.

Our early years created the quite accurate impression that COL was pre-occupied with tertiary, or post-secondary education, but, over the past two years, we have shifted our focus in recognition of a chilling fact of life. Whereas international decision-makers shared the hope that every child would have access to basic education by the year 2000, we still fall short of that goal by 140 million children who are denied access to primary education, largely among young girls.

Increasingly, then, we are stressing four areas:

- \* school education;
- \* non-formal education;
- \* technical education for the world of work; and
- \* youth programmes where we are joining forces more vigorously with the Commonwealth Youth

Programme in a manner which I have described as "Youth-Ed."

Of course, we will continue with our contributions to higher education at a distance. In the process, we are working with all forms of educational materials and methods:

- \* conventional print material;
- \* radio;
- \* film and video, and
- \* modern electronic communications.

The whole Commonwealth has experienced the continuing historic shift from natural resource exploitation, to manufacturing, to financial and capital flows, and now to human resource development and the empowerment of people. Although we will not readily reverse the undesirable consequences of so-called globalisation, at least we can strive to serve the best interests of the developing world and its peoples. In the process, we must ensure that the rich do not continue to become richer while the poor remain poorer in terms of "quality of life," and that the eventual result of globalisation will be the self-determination of people rather than a world of financial neo-colonialism. Happily, the means of doing so is available to us through global knowledge. An excellent example of this has already been mentioned at these meetings - the Commonwealth Electronic Network for School Education (CENSE) which has the capacity to link children around the world to learn about one another, and to form friendships free of imposed prejudices by their elders. And, I can assure you that the available techniques of distance education can now deliver the product at one-quarter the cost of conventional means of education while reaching many more people, and much more quickly.

Finally, let me say that we in COL have now climbed out of a valley in which we found ourselves four years ago, when our survival was by no means certain. The recommendation of the Ministers of Education meeting in Botswana last year, which was adopted at CHOGM in Edinburgh, now provides for triennial funding pledges - in this case for the period July 1, 1997 to June 30, 2000 to correspond with our 3-year Plan of Programmes. However, there are still pledges unfulfilled; as a result, we have some concern that the popular musical of a few years ago - "Promises, Promises" - might for us become "Les Miserables." Yesterday morning, Sir John Kerr opened with some word-play on the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM). In this 80th Anniversary Year of Remembrance, I think as well of the Battle of the Somme - in this case our vigorous pursuit, through your good offices, of your governments to meet their pledges and supplement our funding, all of which is now doubly important to give us credibility in the eyes of the development banks, the foundations and the private sector from whom we are currently striving to secure further support.

Our President, Dr. Dhanarajan, is presently on a major tour to that very end, among other things, but he is

represented here today by our Director of Programmes - Brian Long - who will now report further, by way of illustrating the variety and diversity of our programmes. Meanwhile, I hope you will share your thoughts with me today, during our social breaks or at any time. I am always pleased to discuss your interest in our programmes, and to find new ways of working together.

H. Ian Macdonald

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