

Closing Remarks



"Takeaways, Prospects"

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Transcript

Prof Tolly Mbwette, the Honourable Burchell Whiteman, Prof Peter Okebokula, my co-chair Prof Vincent Tenebe, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen. We have come to the close of a very successful seventh Pan Commonwealth Forum. And the success is due to the contributions of each and every member of the PCF community, that has emerged over the years—with newcomers and recognisable faces. Thank you all. My task today is a challenging one—to sum up the rich discussions at the keynotes, parallel and poster sessions, round tables, and all the intense engagements in between—in fifteen minutes. So let us look at the takeaways and prospects, which I have prepared with Team COL.

I think you will agree that we are much clearer today about our theme of ‘Open Learning for Development: towards empowerment and transformation’ than we were a week ago, so that is an important takeaway. Many ideas have emerged, and exciting prospects have been mapped out

We have had five preconference events and let me highlight some of the takeaways from the VUSSC, Skills Development and Healthy Communities workshops. We also had two workshops on social media and teacher education.

The meeting for VUSSC came up with several recommendations. Three of which are that VUSSC should help small states prepare for climate change; provide a portal for publication and research; and promote the use of OER.

Farm radio broadcasters from six African countries and radio/media delegates from Jamaica and India emphasized that farmer radio programs must be contextualized and broadcast in local languages, engage farmers on many levels, and provide clear opportunities for farmers’ voice to be heard.

Radio interactive generated a lively interest throughout the Forum. One participant said “We’ve found new tools and learned new techniques to interact with listeners.” Participants agreed to follow-up using

Flash-to-vote technology to inject creativity and interaction into existing programmes in Nigeria, especially community radio.

Under the INVEST Africa skills development project, 12 Principals from 6 African countries participated. They brought these beautiful cakes baked by their students. They agreed to focus on teacher training; technology integration; informal sector training; and increasing the participation of women.

Prof. Alan Tait, our Asa Briggs lecturer reminded us of Amartya Sen's famous words that "the people are the real wealth of a nation". Development doesn't mean economic prosperity alone but also the well-being of individuals and communities and the freedom they have to make the choices. While emphasizing that "Open universities must challenge the concept of university" and providing qualifications that lead to livelihoods, it is also important to remember that "Development is about purposeful intervention. It is always values based".

Prof Jegede traced the history and evolution of ODL which has always had a social mission to empower the less privileged as well as to transform communities and societies. "ODL has now been mainstreamed, and face-to-face institutions are adopting it. Who would have imagined that elite institutions like MIT and Harvard will offer ODL type programmes". Ladies and Gentlemen, Africa will see the next growth and flowering of open universities. The Open University of Mauritius is the youngest African Open University with three more planned in Botswana, Namibia, and Kenya.

The Honourable Minister of Tertiary Education and Skills Development, Trinidad & Tobago in his opening plenary stated that "Education will help take us to unpredictable future" and that 'We must begin to give creativity the status needed to empower citizens, and support an enabling environment to foster creativity and innovation. Creativity can be enhanced through the right tools.'

Our keynote speaker for the Girl's and Women's sub-theme said that despite the popularity of ODL, a large number of girls do not have access to education, and policy-makers must deploy ODL for girl's education. "We need political will. Politicians need to walk the talk". She concluded that "Education in the single most effective way to improve the quality of life of every family".

There were rich and fiery discussions around this theme. But, let me share three recommendations. Participants stressed the need to use ODL for women at local government level; use ICT for women's entrepreneurship; and create a gender sensitive monitoring and evaluation framework.

Our keynote speaker on skills development Dr. Rory McGreal said that technology provides immense possibilities for developing 21st century skills. Urging us to use OER, he assured us that "To use knowledge does not mean to consume it. To transfer knowledge does not mean to lose it".

Recommendations from this sub-theme include the following: Many jobs of 2025 do not yet exist. TVET institutions need to focus on job creators not job seekers. They must involve employers in the development of courses to ensure relevance and quality. As the role of teachers is critical, appropriate training is needed. Organizations need to change to adopt flexible and blended approaches.

Jenny Glennie spoke on OER sub-theme and said “Sharing learning materials is not new, but the licensing and technologies supporting sharing are”. Since “accessing and analysing information are the most critical skills in the 21st century”, she suggested that in order to make use of OER effectively, faculty need the skills to knit together the educational resources into a coherent course.

This sub-theme attracted maximum number of papers, and some of the conclusions as we go forward are: the need for further awareness and research on OER; training in online mentoring; and strategies for putting in place the right combination of OER, formal assessment and peer-to-peer learning.

Our keynote speaker for innovation and technology, Prof. Tim Unwin said “ICTs have the potential to enable new kinds of peer-based communal learning”. However, “It is learning that matters, and not technology”. Context is very important, as technologies can widen rather than close the digital divide. As Prof. Unwin cautioned that “ICTs increase inequalities. Inequality increases unless we take specific actions to reduce it”.

The papers presented under this sub-theme covered both the formal and non-formal sectors. Some of the recommendations include, one, local institutions must use Radio/Mobiles creatively for formal and non-formal learning; two, innovation lies in placing technology within the context of community learning for empowerment; and three, technology and innovation need to focus on learning and development outcomes.

Discussions under this sub-theme felt that there should be a balance between academic needs and the needs of the country and national economy. Leadership is critical to institutional development. Participants recommended that research-based practice and good governance would raise the quality of ODL institutions.

Let me conclude from a quote from my own Chairperson, the honourable Burchell Whiteman, who sums up that “we must see ourselves, thinkers and educators, as important points on the continuum of expanding human knowledge”. This is what we are trying to do at the Commonwealth of Learning in partnership with our many stakeholders.

So, at the close of PCF 7, let us reflect on what is different this time and how the world has changed from when we met in Kochi three years ago. At that time, MOOCs was still a little known development in Manitoba, and not mentioned even once. Learning analytics, which was then unknown has now become a real possibility for improving the quality of teaching and learning. We were talking of OER then, but it is much more mainstreamed now with governments adopting policies and institutions investing in Open Textbooks. The growth of mobile devices in these three years has been nothing short of phenomenal. Twenty first century skills were recurring concerns during this PCF, whereas this was not the case in 2010.

What are some of the hens that did not cluck or the birds which did not tweet? One, we did not hear much about how to use ODL for empowerment & transformation; two, there was little mention of evidence-based advocacy for ODL and the need for data; three, what are the outcomes and impact of ODL, and how can we reliably measure and track these? Four, what about the accountability and value for money of ODL institutions and learning?

As we go forward, we will still need to pay attention to harnessing appropriate technologies so that we do not increase social inequalities. We will also need to find strategies to enrich the teaching-learning experience for improved outcomes. It is important to deploy ODL methodologies and build on our experiences in distance education to accelerate progress towards the achievement of MDGs and EFA goals. Our slogan should be “Empowering individuals, Transforming lives”.

As COL completes 25 years, I am reassured from the deliberations at this conference that we are moving on the right track and building on the vision and achievements of the many colleagues who came before us.

We have enjoyed the warmth and generous hospitality of our Nigerian partners, and we are very grateful to the Federal Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Nigerian people. Thank you Nigeria. I would like to thank particularly the many nameless Nigerians, including the staff of the ICC who have helped us at every step of the way.

Thank you dear participants for travelling all the way to Abuja and for your engagement throughout the deliberations. The PCFs are special because of you.

Thank you Prof. Tenebe for being such an understanding and generous host. We appreciate the opportunity that we had to work with Prof. Okoronkwo, Prof. Adu, Prof. Galladima, Barrister Riki, Brigadier General Atere. Ronke and her team have been working round the clock to bring those beautiful newspapers capturing the event of the previous day every morning. Please give a big round of applause to Prof. Tenebe and Team NOUN.

Let me also acknowledge the generous contributions made by our international sponsors and partners: Microsoft Africa; UNICEF; UNESCO; The Open University, UK; The University of London; FARA; The Association of Commonwealth Universities and our sister organisation, the Commonwealth Foundation.

The COL family in Vancouver and in New Delhi wishes you seasons greetings, merry Christmas and a very happy new year.

Travel back safely and have very happy holidays.