

Remarks to Commonwealth Heads of Government at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM)



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by

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Chairman

The Commonwealth of Learning

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Heads of Government,
Secretary-General,
Ladies and Gentlemen

As Heads of Government, you confront multiple issues on a daily basis; as citizens of the world, all of us face together an unconscionable reality - that 140 million children in the world are still denied access to the most basic form of education. Of those, a majority are girls and a high proportion live in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Can we possibly achieve the Dakar targets of Education for All by 2015 and at the same time close the so-called "digital divide"?

I hope that we can - I believe that we can - but only through the practice of open learning, distance education and technology-based teaching. Such is the mission of the Commonwealth of Learning, the existence of which is the product of a far-reaching decision of CHOGM when it met in Vancouver, Canada in 1987.

Since that time, you have reason to be pleased with our success as we have delivered over 625 programmes across the length and breadth of the Commonwealth. As the volunteer Chair of the Commonwealth of Learning, perhaps I should add that I am not paid to give that commercial. But it is

important for you to know that we are a small, highly cost-effective organisation, operating with an annual budget approaching CDN\$9 million and 28 staff in Vancouver. In the last seven years, since facing a fiscal crunch that came close to causing our demise, COL, as an institution, and its staff have earned a reputation world-wide as a leading agent of open learning and distance education.

With our limited resources, we cannot aspire to be a full operating agency or delivery system; rather, we are a catalyst that makes things happen, that provides a kick-start to activities that have been vital in so many situations as outlined in our Report to CHOGM - New Tools for New Skills. I wish time permitted me to describe more of those exciting activities; unfortunately I can just give you a sampling:

Brokering a partnership between the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) of India and the National Commission on Distance and Open Learning of Nigeria for IGNOU to train 50 Nigerians towards a Master of Arts in Distance Education.

Developing and delivering a training programme on entrepreneurship for rural women in Bangladesh. This training programme has already trained a significant number of women entrepreneurs in small businesses. Their value for training many times this number is huge.

Creating schoolnet facilities with private partners in India and with the Government of Brunei Darussalam. We are in the process of completing a feasibility study on a similar network in the South Pacific.

The first 47 students from the Caribbean have graduated with either a B.Ed. or a B.Sc. Degree in Computing and Information Systems from two Canadian Universities through a unique scholarship programme funded by Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Applying distance education techniques, the students studied for their Canadian qualification without travelling out of the Caribbean, thereby reducing the cost of the study for both students and sponsors. COL, in this instance, brokered the deal, built support systems for the learners and monitored the quality of the engagement. The British Government asked the UK coordinators of its Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Programme, (CSFP) to look at this model, and subsequently decided to fund a distance education component within the British Programme. COL is helping the coordinators to implement this decision.

We completed a major review of the post-secondary education system in Sri Lanka and recommended a further and substantial investment in the Open University of Sri Lanka. This was done on contract for the Asian Development Bank. Also in Sri Lanka, we are undertaking an assessment of off-campus education by Sri Lanka's conventional universities with a view to bringing about improvements in the quality of their work. We are doing this for and on behalf of the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka. A similar exercise is being planned for Bangladesh.

In Lesotho, COL was engaged by the World Bank and the Government of Lesotho to implement another in-service teacher training programme to upgrade the knowledge and skills of primary school teachers. The programme was recently launched and in the next six years 3,000 trainees will undergo retaining

while serving as teachers.

In so many of your meetings, you hear about the problems:

the problem of debt;

the problem of poverty;

the problem of unemployment;

the problems of economic development.

Education, however, is a large part of the solution and that is the business in which we are engaged. In funding that business, I can report to you on similar successes:

In Durban, Heads of Government endorsed an annual budget of CDN\$9 million to underpin the plans for the triennium. I am now pleased to say that the first two years of the Three-year Plan came very near to achieving this goal. In their response to appeals from the Secretary-General as well as the COL's Board of Governors, sixteen Commonwealth Governments, including the Governments of New Zealand, Dominica, Kenya, Barbados, Zimbabwe, India, Samoa, the UK and Australia, significantly increased their voluntary support. India significantly increased its funding to COL by about 70%, while the UK tripled its grant making it the highest contributor to our resource base.

I also take pleasure in reporting that the Republic of Nigeria once again became one of COL's major donors with a pledge of US\$1 million for the current Three-year Plan period. We received the first tranche of US\$360,000 from the Government of Nigeria in December 2001.

Like the weather, our funding varies between dark clouds and sunny skies. While COL continues to be grateful for the support it currently receives from member states and remains confident and optimistic that its value to Commonwealth development will continue to engender support from them, recent developments in Canada underscore our vulnerability as well. Starting with the next financial year, COL will no longer receive a grant from the Government of British Columbia, where we are located. Happily, only yesterday, the Government of Canada announced a doubling of its annual grant to CDN\$2.2 million thereby maintaining Canada's overall contribution.

Meanwhile we urge all member states that have so far not made any contributions to COL to do so. Page 20 of our Report to CHOGM lists contributors and non-contributors to our budget.

Finally, we present to Heads, along with our Report to CHOGM, six recommendations for approval to steer us through the next phase of our work. I do not believe you will find them controversial but the assurance of your continuing support will be vital for the on-going mission of the Commonwealth of Learning, and to ensuring, in the words of Secretary-General McKinnon, that there will be "smiles on the faces of Commonwealth children".