Opening Remarks: PCF8

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It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the eighth Pan Commonwealth Forum

Let me begin by thanking our hosts the Ministry of Education, and our partners the Open University of Malaysia for their warm welcome and generous hospitality. Malaysia has a large heart and knows how to take care of its guests. Dato Prof Mansor has been most understanding and accommodating throughout the planning process and we have enjoyed a very pleasant and productive partnership with our OUM colleagues. Thank you for your impeccable arrangements.

Prof Ramli has been the driving force for all the local arrangements and I thank him most warmly for his contributions as I do my own colleague Dr Balaji, who has been a picture of patience at all times.

I would like to thank each and every member of the Local Organising Committee for their meticulous hard work and for cheerfully taking on so many additional responsibilities.

The Programme Committee at COL supported by our excellent Programme Manager Anne Gaskell, have worked closely with OUM counterparts to develop a robust and exciting programme and for their attention to adjusting the schedules to accommodate last-minute requests.

Let me also acknowledge the generous contributions made by our international sponsors and partners: The Open University, UK, the University of London, the National Open University of Nigeria, the National Institute of Open Schooling, India, the Association of Commonwealth Universities and our sister organisation, the Commonwealth Foundation.

As you know, COL is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government at the 1987 CHOGM. Canada came forward to host the organisation and we've been in beautiful British Columbia since.

What do we do? Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to quality education and training.

The Commonwealth has 52 member states that span all regions of the globe, representing the rich diversity of our world. Of the nearly 50 countries represented here today, 40 are members of the Commonwealth.

As you can see the road to Kuala Lumpur has passed through all regions of the Commonwealth. Starting in Brunei, we went down to South Africa, travelled to New Zealand and then to Jamaica, followed by the UK, India and Nigeria.

We are back in Asia with what is a unique opportunity for members of the global education community to come together and explore how open online and flexible learning can best lead to sustainable development.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to three things: one, economic growth, two, social inclusion and three, environmental conservation. Let me share three quick examples of how we do this.

COL offers an innovative initiative called the Lifelong Learning for Farmers. This unique programme has lifted thousands of farmers out of poverty in seven countries. Farmers learn in their local languages using basic mobile phones. Research shows that for every dollar invested, income and assets worth $9 have been generated among farming communities in India.

How does COL's work support social inclusion? There are many cultural and social barriers that still prevent girls from accessing secondary education. Open schools provide cost-effective and flexible learning opportunities by using a range of technologies from print to the internet. This young woman from Bangladesh was married at age 12 and went back to an open school at 22 so that she could help her children with their school work.

Here is but one example of COL's contribution to environmental conservation. Working with partners in the University of South Pacific, IIT Kanpur and UNESCO, COL offered a Massive Open Online Course or MOOC on Climate Change. 70% of the participants were from the Pacific region. These are some examples of how COL promotes learning to achieve sustainable development.

This aligns us to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the international community last year. Sustainable development aims to impact the five P's. Prosperity and peace for the people, partnerships to achieve this objective and a common goal to protect our planet for future generations.

Sustainable Development Goal 4, which focuses on education, aspires to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030.

Can we achieve these targets? If we review the global situation, we find that there are still 263 million children and young people out of school. Over 750 million adults are illiterate, seventy one million or 13 % of the youth are unemployed. In addition 15% of the world's population experience some form of disability. I have tried to give you some headlines relating to the magnitude of the challenge.

There is a huge disparity between enrolments in tertiary education in the developing and developed worlds. If you look at the left figure, you find that in four decades, tertiary education enrolments in North America and Europe have more than doubled from 30 % to an average of about 70-80 %. In the developing world the highest growth has been in the Arab states where the enrolment ratio went up during the same period from about 7 % to between 25-30%. SSA continues to record an average of 5-7 %.

As Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz and Bruce Greenwald say, 'what truly separates developed from less developed countries is not just a gap in resources or output but a gap in knowledge'.

If these divides have to be bridged, it cannot be business as usual. In which ways can we harness ODL and technologies to achieve both speed and scale? Technology and distance education have an important role to play in scaling up access to education and training. It is for this reason that COL has consistently advocated for the use of distance learning methods to be adopted not just for formal education but also for formal and non-formal learning.

Even in the US, distance education enrolments continue to grow. According to a recent Babson Survey, more than two thirds or 67% of the students are enrolled in at least one distance course in a public institution. There has been a substantive growth in online learning.

Many developing countries are leapfrogging straight into mobile learning rather than PC-based self-paced courses. In fact the 2016 Ambient Insight report indicates that there has been a negative growth of elearning in many developed countries. Asia and Africa have several mobile-only countries. In mobile-only countries, the mobile device is the dominant device used to access the Internet and people are introduced to learning content through apps.

The next question is can education help us achieve sustainable development? A World Bank study shows that one additional year of schooling for women can result in a 20% increase in their income. Even a .1% improvement in a country's education equality can result in an over 23% increase in per capita income. In Ethiopia, six years of education can result in a better contribution to soil conservation and more environment-friendly agricultural practices. There is a clear link then between education, economic growth, equity, environmental conservation, sustainable development.

One of the objectives of this forum then is to collectively look at the bigger picture and exchange knowledge and experiences on how we can make a difference. What are the important trends that will affect our policy and practice? How can we work in partnership and collaborate to identify joint actions to achieve our common goals?

In order to consult more widely, we organised four online forums based on the sub-themes of the forum during April to September. Each online event lasted for one month.

Participants came from 66 countries: both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth.

Our warm gratitude to the moderators and the OUM and COL staff who worked tirelessly to make these forums a resounding success.

The discussions were rich and nuanced but let me just share the headlines. Some of the recurring themes across the four online discussions were: OER for quality and equity, appropriate technologies for access and inclusion, research for improving policy and practice and harnessing ODL for formal and non-formal learning.

Over the next three days, we have a full agenda. Some of the key questions could relate to how the various developments in technologies—mobile devices, learning analytics, big data-- Success will depend on how technology can be effectively harnessed in the interests of people and pedagogy. How can we open up education to include the hitherto excluded constituencies? How can we develop innovative models and methods to achieve impact with speed and scale? Finally how can we promote lifelong learning that contributes to sustainable development? I hope some of these questions will be taken up as we discuss how to catalyse change within our own institutions and practices and what we can do collectively to expedite the process.

At this PCF, we will prepare the KL Declaration, which will capture your ideas, suggestions and discussions and distil these into key recommendations that we can take forward. Leading this process are our VP, Dr Bala, Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic, formerly of UNESCO and a close partner of COL and Prof Shaari of OUM and you can email your comments and suggestions to them at the email given here.

On that note, let me once again welcome you to PCF 8.