
Interviews
with
**Badrul
Khan**



Interview with Sir John Daniel

Badrul Khan: I understand that the purpose of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is to help developing nations improve access to quality education and training. How are you doing in achieving that goal?

Sir John Daniel: The Commonwealth of Learning is the only international intergovernmental agency that focuses exclusively on using technology to expand the scope and scale of human learning. It operates on the premise that knowledge is the key to individual freedom and to cultural, social, and economic development.

COL helps the governments of the developing countries within the 53-member Commonwealth to develop policies that make innovation sustainable and to build systems or applications that expand learning. It operates in partnership with other international and bilateral organizations working on the Millennium Development Goals. These include: the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), New Zealand's Agency for International Development (NZAID), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), the African Virtual University (AVU), the regional development banks, and the World Bank.

COL is a small agency. It achieves high impact through its focus on technology, placing special emphasis on open and distance learning (ODL) because of its proven effectiveness.

One example of using technology to address key development issues is COL's Media Empowerment Programme, which trains local people to shoot and edit videos in order to take culturally appropriate messages about HIV/AIDS to rural villages. This peer health education project in The Gambia has reached every secondary school

in the country (150 schools) with over 35% of the entire population reached through the village cinema that COL developed.

Other examples are a mobile Internet unit in a boat that has trained thousands of farmers in the Atrai River Watershed in Bangladesh and a radio series that has linked agricultural research and rural radio in several African countries.

BK: While growing up in Chittagong, Bangladesh, in the 1980s, I used to dream about having access to learning resources only available to learners in the developed countries. Now we are blessed with the advent of the Internet and online learning methodologies and technologies. The Web has become a powerful, global, interactive, dynamic, economic, and democratic medium of learning and teaching at a distance. Are developing countries taking advantage of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to produce stand-alone and blended-learning materials? If yes, what role does COL play to help developing countries to incorporate Internet and digital technologies in learning and training?

JD: As the following examples show, COL has a catholic attitude to technology and media, regarding the Web as just one tool in the kit and not necessarily the most appropriate tool in the circumstances of many developing countries. Four examples of COL's work in the introduction of ICTs are: (1) the networking of schools in Africa and Asia; (2) the creation of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (two-thirds of Commonwealth members are small island or landlocked states); (3) the use of commercial ICT kiosks in villages in India to bring information and lifelong learning to farmers so as to improve their livelihoods; and (4) COL's virtual library of resources and documents on gender equity (www.colfinder.org/dev), part of the world's most comprehensive source of electronic documents on open and distance learning.

BK: To meet the needs of the education and training market today, more and more educational institutions in developing countries are likely to take advantage of information and communication technologies to offer virtual education. In addition, educational institutions from abroad may offer courses and degrees to the education market in developing countries. Therefore, institutions within developing countries and outside of the developing countries need policies and standards to participate in virtual education. To exploit the full potential of virtual education, I have proposed that each country needs a sound *National Virtual Education Plan (NVEP)* benefiting all strata of the population, including persons with disabilities, which should be in place in each developing country (<http://www.cemca.org/newsletter/sep2003/sep2003.pdf>). Do you think establishing an NVEP is an important first step in open and distance learning? How can COL help countries in developing their NVEPs?

JD: COL firmly believes that the deployment of technology-mediated education (not merely ICTs) should start from a solid base of policy. That is why assisting governments with policy development is the first of COL's three programs of activity (the other two are systems and applications). COL regards it as important that policies for technology-mediated learning be fully integrated into a government's overall policy framework for education and training, rather than being conceived as an afterthought. For example, in building the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth from the bottom up, COL is asking each small state to identify how this initiative would fit with its existing policies and strategies for postsecondary education. Similarly, the workshops that COL runs in Africa on eLearning always begin with sessions for policy-makers before undertaking training for practitioners. Nigeria is effervescing with projects in open and distance learning, and COL is helping that country create a policy framework so that national priorities are made clear.

BK: Considering your unique experience and interest in open and distance learning, can you share with us your vision for open and distance learning in both developed and developing countries?

JD: We are now at the stage where leadership in open and distance learning (ODL) is passing from the developed to the developing countries. India and China are at the front of the pack because of their large populations, rapid economic growth, and numerous sophisticated technical people. The great benefit of ODL is that it can reach large numbers of people. Institutions go through qualitative as well as quantitative changes when they become very large. Nothing in the developed world can match the scale and sophistication of the use of satellite technology by the 1.5 million students of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (India); the use of networking in the Maharashtra Knowledge Corporation Limited (also in India); or the training of a whole city in the use of ICTs by the Shanghai Television University.

In the developed world, the arrival of the Web has shifted the focus of ODL activity from increasing access to the individualization of learning. The conflicting reports of the success of online learning in institutions reflect a diverse reality. Moving a traditional institution based on classroom teaching to dual mode status (i.e., use of ODL and face-to-face teaching) is a difficult organizational challenge. The institutions that have been most successful in making the transition have invested in the creation of a policy framework on the basis of wide consultation within the academic and student communities.

BK: As the Internet becomes an increasingly efficient and effective medium for learning at a distance, how would it affect the way we do the business of teaching and training in the future? Will virtual education replace traditional teaching

and training practices? If yes, what are the implications for stakeholder groups including learners, instructors, support staff, and administration?

JD: Human beings tend to overestimate the impact of innovations in the short term, while underestimating their long-term significance. This has been dramatically the case for the Internet as a learning tool. At the time of the dotcom frenzy in 1999–2000, enthusiasts suggested that eLearning would sweep away all other forms of education in a matter of years. Viewed against such (unreasonable) expectations, eLearning has been something of a disappointment. Older forms of teaching and learning are alive and well.

Nevertheless, eLearning is steadily seeping into education and training at all levels, usually as an additional tool rather than as a complete replacement of existing practice. For short pieces of training, eLearning can be an excellent stand-alone tool. For more substantial education and training activities, eLearning is more often one element of a broader strategy. The key implication for institutions and instructors is that students now expect to have appropriate elements of their learning experience available on the Internet. These include administrative processes, content support, and interaction with others. □

Sir John Daniel, a world-renowned authority in open and distance learning, joined the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) June 2004 as President and Chief Executive Officer. Sir John came to COL from UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) where he was Assistant Director-General for Education and headed the global Education for All program.



Knighthood by Queen Elizabeth in 1994 for services to higher education, the honor recognized the leading role that he has played internationally, over three decades, in the development of distance learning in universities. Sir John began his career in ancient universities, with an undergraduate degree from Oxford and a doctorate from the

University of Paris, both in metallurgy. During his first academic appointment at the École Polytechnique of the University of Montreal, he began part-time study for a Masters in Educational Technology. The program required an internship, and he spent the summer of 1972 at the brand new UK Open University, where he had a "conversion experience." Inspired by the idealism, the scale, the technology, and the focus on students that he found at the Open University, he decided to join the distance learning revolution.

He spent four years helping to establish Québec's Télé-université, moved west to Alberta as Vice-President of Athabasca University, and then returned to Montreal as Vice-Rector of Concordia University. In 1984, he became President of Laurentian University, Ontario. He then moved to the UK as Vice-Chancellor of the Open University in 1990 and added the duties of President of the United States Open University in 1998.

What Is the Commonwealth of Learning (COL)? *The Commonwealth of Learning is an intergovernmental organization created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education knowledge, resources, and technologies. COL is helping developing nations improve access to quality education and training. Headquartered in Vancouver, Canada, COL is the only official Commonwealth agency located outside Britain and is the world's only intergovernmental organization solely concerned with the promotion and development of distance education and open learning. COL is helping to increase the capacities of developing nations to meet the demands for improved access to quality education and training. Commonwealth Governments financially support COL on a voluntary basis. Major contributors have included Australia, Britain, Brunei, Canada, India, New Zealand, and Nigeria.*

Badrul H. Khan, a Contributing Editor, is Associate Professor and Director of Educational Technology Leadership Cohort program at the George Washington University and founder of *BooksToRead.com*, a recommended readings site on the Internet. He is an international speaker, author, educator and consultant in the field of e-learning and educational technology (khanb@gwu.edu or bhk@BooksToRead.com); Website: <http://BadrulKhan.com/khan>).