

Remarks on behalf of Commonwealth of Learning at the inaugural session of the OER Symposium in Penang

By Sanjaya Mishra

Tan Sri Dato' Emeritus Professor Dr. Gajaraj Dhanarajan, Dr Rosalia Sciortino, Director, International Development Research Center, Prof. Tian Belawati, President, International Council for Open and Distance Education, Dr Gwang-Jo Kim, Director, UNESCO, Bangkok, Prof. Ho Sinn Chye, Secretary General, Asian Association of Open Universities, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I bring to you the greetings of Prof. Asha Kanwar, President and CEO of Commonwealth of Learning, who will be here with us tomorrow. I am honoured to represent her at this inaugural session, and the Commonwealth of Learning is happy to be associated with this important symposium. The Wawasan Open University is one of the innovative centres of teaching and learning in the Commonwealth, and COL has accompanied it on its journey from the very outset.

Even though many of you know COL but for those who don't, let me say a few words about what we do. COL is an intergovernmental organization that helps Commonwealth governments and institutions use various technologies to improve and expand education, training and learning in support of development. Our slogan is "Learning for Development" and we work in 54 Member States that cover all regions of globe.

Why is COL interested in promoting Open Educational Resources (OER)? When COL was first established, its fundamental goal was that "any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth". Its purpose was to "assist[ing] the acquisition and delivery of teaching materials and more generally facilitating access to them; and commissioning and promoting the adaptation and development of teaching materials". This was visionary at the time and is now beginning to bear fresh fruit as OER.

COL has taken several concrete steps to promote the use of OER. In fact COL was promoting the development of OER in the nineties with its STAMP 2000+ teacher training materials well before the term OER was coined in 2002. This was led by our then President, Tan Sri Raj, who has always been a pioneer of OER and an advocate for 'reaching the last person in the queue'. More recently, COL is one of the first intergovernmental organisations to declare its commitment to OER through the development of an OER policy.

COL with support from the Hewlett Foundation has facilitated the development of OER for secondary schools by teachers in six Commonwealth countries. Thirty-two Member States of the Commonwealth are actively engaged in developing OER under COL's Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth initiative. This long engagement with OER gives COL a perspective about the inherent challenges and emerging opportunities.

The OER movement is a people's movement, founded on principles that challenge the organisational values and pedagogical practices of many educational institutions that still represent closed systems. The principles of openness, sharing and collaboration that characterise the OER movement are different from centralized and closed education models based on elitism and exclusion. The OER movement is an important milestone in democratising education for the 21st century.

We believe that although infrastructure and technology are important in relation to the capacity to develop and use OER, there is a need for a paradigm shift that explores the link between OER and institutional structures, institutional values and the freedom of stakeholders such as teachers and students.

The present Symposium brings together some of the leading experts in this field. We hope that the deliberations will build the momentum required to continue our collective work towards promoting more flexible and open regimes to collaborate, create, and share educational resources.

We are sure the Symposium will bring together new ideas and experiences, and on behalf of the Commonwealth of Learning and on my own behalf; I wish the Symposium a great success.

Thanks for your kind attention.