

THIRD PAN-COMMONWEALTH FORUM ON OPEN LEARNING (PCF3)

4-8 JULY 2004, DUNEDIN, NEW ZEALAND

EVALUATION REPORT **Executive Summary and Highlights**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Third Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning

The Third Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF3) was held in Dunedin, New Zealand from 4-8 July 2004. The conference organisers were the Commonwealth of Learning www.col.org, the Distance Education Association of New Zealand (Inc) www.deanz.org.nz and the Government of New Zealand, in conjunction with Dunedin Conference Management Services (DCMS) www.dcms.co.nz.

The main theme of the Forum was *Building Learning Communities for Our Millennium: Reaching Wider Audiences through Innovative Approaches*. Organisers developed a unique structure for the Forum where only keynote speakers presented papers. All other papers and posters were refereed and if accepted, formed an integral part of the conference documentation and resources and/or were displayed at the Forum (i.e. poster). A copy of the PCF3 Programme is included in the Appendix of this report for reference.

All participants worked in one or more interest groups. This format was intended to draw on individual and collective expertise to address outcomes that are beneficial, in terms of both policy and practical applications, to a wide range of participants, sponsors and associated institutions and governments. The emphasis for these interest group topics was on latest developments, best practice, emerging issues and research. The sub-themes of Education, Health and Local Government were also identified for exploration.

Evaluation Methodology

This evaluation is based mainly on feedback collected from participants through a paper survey distributed on the final day. The survey was customized for PCF3 through a combination of open and close-ended questions relating to goals, indicators, programme structure, changes in knowledge and motivation levels, informing decision-making with new knowledge, motivating learnings, and a series of agreement statements that corresponded with the PCF2 survey. The response rate for the PCF3 survey was 49% (203 completed surveys / 415 participants, including 15 COL and CEMCA staff some of whom did complete the survey), which is much higher than the response rate for the PCF2 feedback survey (16.4%).

Additional data sources include comments written on mini-sheets distributed during the final session of PCF3 (the mini-sheets were originally intended to be a tool for gathering questions and promoting interaction during the session but due to logistics and room set-up, this did not happen), and unsolicited comments provided after PCF3 through email letters to staff at COL. Also, a group de-briefing interview was held with three COL staff members approximately two weeks after PCF3 and with the conference manager in New Zealand one month after PCF3 to provide contextual understanding and..

Organization of this Document and the Complete Report

This document provides the Executive Summary and the highlights of the findings. The complete report is organized into three main sections: executive summary, highlights of the findings, and a full presentation of participant feedback provided in the paper survey, mini-sheets, and unsolicited emails. The Report Appendix contains the PCF3 Programme as well as a presentation of sub-group analysis cross-referencing participants' primary involvement in open and distance learning (ODL) and major area of activity in ODL with success ratings, reactions to the PCF3 structure, and informing decision-making with new knowledge.

Recommendations

Overall, PCF3 was considered to be very successful and a highly worthwhile experience for participants. PCF3 was rated as particularly effective at providing ODL practitioners and policy-makers with networking opportunities. The following recommendations are based on a triangulation across data sources and reflect the majority of views within a holistic interpretation of the PCF3 experience. They are presented here for consideration in planning for PCF4.

1. Structure the organisational partnering to ensure support from the local government and a practical distribution of responsibilities (i.e., to prevent bottlenecks and provide effective service to applicants and participants). COL should be responsible for designing and approving all communication materials related to the conference.
2. Centralize travel and visa arrangements for sponsored delegates as far as possible.
3. Implement a full sponsorship model (instead of partial sponsorship) so that delegates can make informed decisions at least six months in advance of the forum.
4. Consider a longer planning timeframe before the forum. Three years may be preferable to the current planning window of two years.
5. Provide clear and detailed descriptions of the conference format, themes, and expectations for participants' roles in pre-conference material.
6. Maintain the policy of "equalizing" for accommodation, but consider a higher level of accommodation.
7. Maintain the innovative format of PCF3 with some modifications: allow for brief paper presentations in interest groups, include more unstructured free time for networking, arrange time for regional meetings and special area interest groups, reduce the cost of social activities, and continue to be sensitive to the wide range of dietary restrictions and preferences.
8. Ensure that the selected conference location maximizes quality while also taking into consideration the following factors: relatively comfortable climate/season and relatively uncomplicated visa requirements (developed countries such as the G8 will be unsuitable for this reason as either destination or transit points).
9. Extend the momentum of the conference through regular updating of the website and postings of papers, keynote addresses, and conference reports (including this one).

Findings ~ Highlights

Effectiveness of PCF3 with respect to Accomplishing Goals

Rating Scale: Not effective 1 2 3 4 5 Very effective

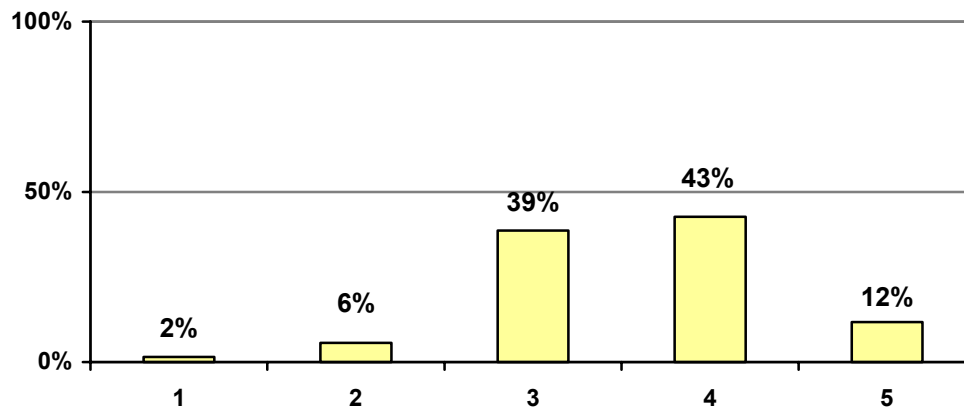
Goals	Average Rating	#
1. To help Open and Distance Learning (ODL) practitioners & policy-makers make informed decisions through <i>improved capacities</i>	3.38	198
2. To help ODL practitioners & policy-makers make informed decisions through <i>improved ODL knowledge</i>	3.44	200
3. To provide ODL practitioners & policy-makers with frameworks for <i>promoting ODL as a valid option for educational delivery</i>	3.47	196
4. To provide ODL practitioners & policy-makers with frameworks for <i>helping lifelong learners improve their standard of living through education</i>	3.28	196
5. To <i>improve the availability of knowledge resources</i> to planners, policy makers, managers, educators and field personnel engaged to use ODL effectively in development programmes	3.47	196
6. To provide ODL practitioners & policy-makers with <i>networking opportunities</i>	4.16	200

- All six goals rated *above 3.2* on a 5 point scale (where 5 = very effective).
- Goal 6: “To provide ODL practitioners & policy-makers with *networking opportunities*” received the highest average rating (4.16)
- A range of suggestions accompanied the rating of goals: need for more structure, need for more opportunity to exchange experiences, need for more concrete cases, need to take messages to the workplace, need for more time [to achieve goal], need for continued availability of information and resources, need for more regional focus, and need for a means to connect with authors of papers.
- Examples of additional goals identified include: to provide experiences that could affect teaching (rating of 5), to gain appreciation and understanding of diversity of cultures of Commonwealth countries (rating of 4), to identify a role for institution in the Commonwealth/COL (rating of 2), to develop opportunities for contacts with people in own area of interest of developing web materials that are open source (rating of 1), and to forecast into the future of ODL (no rating given).

Articulation and Assessment of Success Indicators for PCF3

- A wide range of success indicators were articulated falling within 4 broad thematic categories: 1) *networking* (e.g., making new contacts with ODL researchers and practitioners), 2) *new knowledge and information* (e.g., study cases, new delivery ideas, awareness of international issues, best practice survival kit), 3) *motivation* (e.g., challenged to work in new ways, seeing many people have the same problems) and 4) *cultural exchange* (e.g., diversity of regions and institutions).

Overall Success of PCF3



Average Rating = 3.57 (based on 197 respondents; 5 point scale where 5 = extremely successful)

Illustrative comments accompanying the success ratings include:

- *This was a wonderful conference. Good format.*
- *This is my very first forum to attend. The week was very well organized.*
- *The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. Wouldn't want this format all the time but it was worth a try.*
- *The format introduced this year should remain. It helps extensive and purposeful participation. The plenary sessions were extremely useful and diverse. It is useful that we learn from our diversity.*
- *I thoroughly enjoyed the group discussion and group work. It opened up a lot of things for me and see things from different perspectives. Please continue a similar format for future conferences. However better organized groups can be organized with people bringing documented case studies and share with all.*
- *Extremely useful in that the areas covered were relevant and pertinent to small and developing countries.*
- *Despite the anxiety which the new method of running a conference, the approach worked well in promoting participants' interaction on well focused topics.*
- *We still need to accommodate marginal areas within ODL.*
- *The conference was successful but for future planning you may think of tackling a lot more topics on emerging issues, distance education and technology use in both developed and developing countries.*
- *The abstract book was useful but did not have the opportunity to interact with some of the listed authors and papers.*
- *Some excellent keynotes but group sessions too difficult and unfocused.*
- *Fewer or better organized goals for concurrent sessions and more keynotes.*
- *Excellent networking opportunities. Appreciate the hard work of organizers, facilitators, conveners – well done! Russell Bishop's keynote was outstanding.*

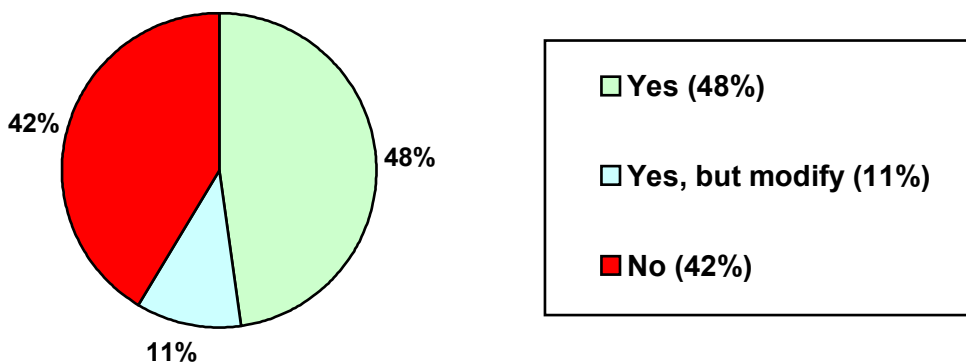
Changes Recommended by Participants to Improve Forum

- 1) *improved pre-conference communication* (e.g., more advance warning to participants about expected roles; identify participants with like interests and group them; develop a clear definition of the themes to ensure a common understanding of participants; better management of expectations; release papers prior to conference if they are not being presented),
- 2) *better accommodations* (e.g., improve accommodations - however I appreciate large effort by COL to offer opportunities to as many as possible; increase the minimum standard of accommodations - even if this means fewer supported delegates),
- 3) *more focused and concrete content* (e.g., focus on what is being done and how can that process be useful to others, not on what needs to be done; commission case studies ahead of time; have smaller groups and tackle specific issues towards achieving the millennium goals; substitute keynotes which can be very worthy but ultimately just rhetoric – with some opportunity for more formal exchange of good practice.),
- 4) *allow for more paper presentations* (e.g., more presentations and short reports from participants),
- 5) *different timing, location, and structure of the conference* (e.g., more outings; day in the middle without activity; hold conference in season with better weather; hold workshops before, during and after the conference; more keynotes; include time for regional interest groups to convene; hold in location with easier access to visas; more deliberate and specialized grouping of participants with common backgrounds and interests; no speakers after 3:00pm; more meat in lunch; more attention to vegetarians; discussion groups to have more than one theme).

Suggested Knowledge Topics for Future Sessions

- a wide range of topics were mentioned including: country specific ODL issues; teacher-learner interpersonal skills; elearning and blended approaches; new learning models; management of ODL; innovations in open source; ODL policies; student support services; use of ICT; human resource development for ODL; literacy; gender issues; social constructivist pedagogy in ODL; the future of ODL; cost-effective models for learning materials; accessibility issues; health and agriculture; and principles for best practice

Same structure for the PCF4 forum in 2006?



(Based on 195 respondents)

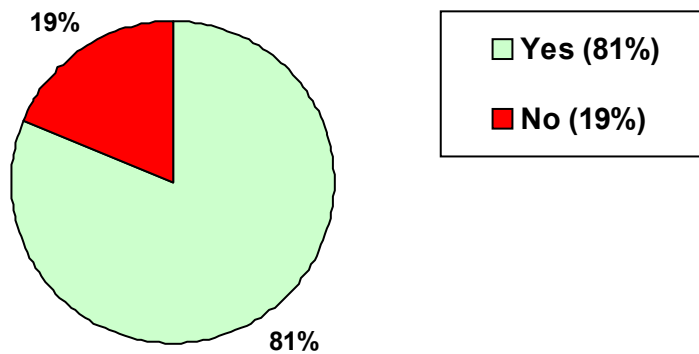
Suggested Changes to the Structure for 2006

- *I would have preferred a group-work format that allowed us to engage with more people and ideas. Make space for carefully selected academic papers. Avoid sit-down banquets/balls, etc – we need opportunities to circulate at all times.*
- *The group activities could begin with short presentation of papers of 5-7 minutes each.*
- *Maintain the format.*
- *Potential participants need to have such format explained well in advance of the event.*
- *People could be allocated to themes prior to the forum and some papers selected for presentation.*
- *A mix of concept presentations and case study experiences.*
- *Variety of speakers that highlight why they run successful programs. The benefit is in being able to use or implement what someone else has already tested.*
- *A blending of this structure with the traditional – maybe some paper presentations to set the context – not more than one or two presentations on each theme. The social constructivist model really engages you – positively.*
- *I would suggest half and half. To maximize networking participants be allowed to select from two guided workshops/symposium on selected themes. Plus tight paper sessions i.e., max 10 minutes per person. Conveners of themes need more preparation - esp re outputs.*
- *More clearly define areas of expertise, so delegates can select sessions.*
- *Keep the format intact, but allow some select papers to be presented the traditional way. Also, allow some workshops.*
- *Similar but not exactly the same. Build on the experience of this conference to develop useful group meeting topics and activities. Perhaps expert panels on various aspects to stimulate and inform discussion groups and debates.*
- *Discussion should be guided by professional facilitators.*

Changes in Levels of Knowledge and Motivation

- “Then and now” knowledge ratings increased; the average rating for knowledge levels regarding ODL before PCF3 was 3.33 on a 5 point scale (where 5 = high) and the average rating after PCF3 (last day) was 4.07
- “Then and now” motivation ratings also increased; the average rating for motivation levels regarding ODL before PCF3 was 3.75 on a 5 point scale (where 5 = high) and the average rating after PCF3 (last day) was 4.32
- 59% of respondents moved up one or more points on the knowledge scale and 44% moved up one or more points on the motivation scale

Anticipate Being Able to Inform Decision-Making with New Knowledge?



(Based on 164 respondents)

Selected Examples of How Decision-Making Will Be Informed

- *Much of our role involves formal and informal advice and conversation to government agencies and policy makers.*
- *Give correct steps to follow to my subordinates when carrying out research. Encourage teamwork at the place of work.*
- *Greater knowledge of what is happening in other countries to inform my analysis.*
- *Rebuilding a new team when I return to Australia – I can reinforce the ideas that I had previously plus new knowledge with the evidence and experience of others.*
- *Establishing a national ODL association to coordinate all activities.*
- *Dean of school will be informed about several new approaches.*
- *Propose/design policies for ODL that can be used at national level.*
- *The area of adult education or lifelong learning must now be given additional priority in my country.*
- *Ability to quote/reflect on international scenarios/issues and policy level.*
- *With respect to preparing strategies for the next five years or so this experience would be quite useful.*
- *Content from PCF3 will help inform national e-learning policies and strategies.*

Examples of Learnings that were Motivating for ODL Practitioners and Policy-makers

- *Need to employ varied technologies that are relevant and meet needs of learners in my country.*
- *Issue of access to out of school population.*
- *Sophistication of technology is not the be-all and end-all in a successful delivery made in Teacher Training.*
- *Research materials available are extensive - access and learn from them. There is a sense of humanity in every person I met, that we are part of the big picture but we do what we can in our own little world!*
- *There are other active optimists working very hard together.*

- *I got enriched knowledge regarding ODL practices in difference COL member countries. I made good contacts with participants who came to attend the forum across the countries. I feel illuminated by key presentations.*
- *There is not such “best” practice. Best practice is different throughout the various local environments we all have.*
- *The ideas about bringing education to the communities through innovative approaches.*
- *One-to-one sharing of practice issues and techniques; greater awareness of needs and concerns, and ways to begin to address them.*
- *The sense of community, that there are many others all over the world struggling to extend education to the underprivileged, has encouraged a greater sense of responsibility to provide better education to the students I work for.*
- *That my work is relevant and important. Some additional ideas about methods for ODL, and other success factors for measurement.*
- *The fact that I just realized again that I am not the only person struggling with problems – there are other people experiencing similar problems! (and I now have their names to contact them for help!).*
- *I am enlightened.*

Ranking of Agreement Statements on Different Aspects of PCF3

- These five statements had the highest agreement ratings:
 - *Registration and secretariat services were satisfactory.*
 - *Forum facilities were conveniently located.*
 - *The forum venue was satisfactory.*
 - *Participants were given an equal opportunity to speak during Interest Group discussions.*
 - *The duration of the forum was appropriate.*
- These five statements had the lowest agreement ratings:
 - *Interest Group discussions achieved satisfactory outcomes.*
 - *Interest Group discussions addressed Millennium Development Goals.*
 - *The forum was held at a convenient time of year.*
 - *Summaries of interest group discussions were effectively communicated.*
 - *Accommodation was satisfactory.*

Comparison with PCF2 Rankings

- These five statements had the highest agreement ratings for PCF2:
 - *Forum facilities were conveniently located.*
 - *Registration and Secretariat Services were satisfactory.*
 - *Forum facilities were comfortable.*
 - *The Forum provided me with new insights in open and distance learning.*
 - *The duration of the Forum was appropriate.*

- These five statements had the lowest agreement ratings for PCF2:
 - *The Forum was held at a convenient time of year.*
 - *Parallel sessions were well-organised [including technical support].*
 - *Accommodation was conveniently located.*
 - *Parallel sessions were appropriate length.*
 - *Accommodation was satisfactory.*