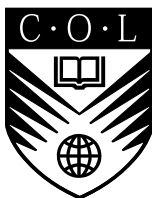

PERSPECTIVES ON
DISTANCE EDUCATION

Lifelong Learning &
Distance Higher
Education

Christopher McIntosh, Editor

Zeynep Varoglu, Editorial Coordinator



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The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

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Higher Education

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CONTENTS

Foreword	v
<i>Koïchiro Matsuura</i>	
Preface	vii
<i>John Daniel</i>	
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
<i>Christopher McIntosh</i>	
Chapter 2 Lifelong Learning for Equity and Social Cohesion: A New Challenge for Higher Education	11
<i>Suzy Halimi</i>	
Chapter 3 The Impact of ICT on Lifelong Learning	23
<i>Mary Thorpe</i>	
Chapter 4 Approaches to Funding	33
<i>Greville Rumble and Fredric M. Litto</i>	
Chapter 5 Lifelong learning in the African context: A practical example from Senegal	51
<i>Olivier Sagna</i>	
Chapter 6 The Chinese Approach.....	63
<i>Ding Xingfu, Gu Xiaoqing and Zhu Zhiting</i>	
Chapter 7 Quality Assurance Survey of Mega Universities	79
<i>Insung Jung</i>	
Chapter 8 The Higher Education Open and Distance Learning Knowledge Base	97
<i>Zeynep Varoglu</i>	
Chapter 9 The Finnish Virtual University and Finland's Path to a Learning Society	107
<i>Marja Kylämä</i>	
Chapter 10 Promoting Cross-Border Recognition and Mobility Developments in the Netherlands	121
<i>Jindra Divis, Astrid Scholten and Anne Marie Mak</i>	
Chapter 11 Charting the Evolution of Lifelong Learning and Distance Higher Education: The Role of Research.....	133
<i>Tony Bates</i>	
Chapter 12 Conclusion	151
<i>Christopher McIntosh</i>	

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FOREWORD

by the Director-General of UNESCO

When UNESCO was founded in 1945, no one in the world of higher education could have foreseen how radically this field would change by the beginning of the twenty-first century. The onward march of globalization, the rise in student mobility, the increasing emphasis on lifelong learning, the proliferation of open universities, the growing role of private sector providers, the advent of the Internet, e-learning and virtual classrooms – all of these developments have profoundly altered the nature of higher education over the past few decades, and the future undoubtedly holds further radical changes.

Throughout this period, UNESCO has continued to uphold the fundamental human right to education and the principle that higher education should be accessible to all on the basis of merit and throughout the life span. It was, for example, largely through the advocacy of UNESCO that the concept of lifelong learning came into widespread use from the 1970s onwards. UNESCO also remains committed to the free exchange of ideas and knowledge, to the development of a learning culture, to the promotion of knowledge as a global public good, and to the building of a truly democratic open learning world. In the perspective of these aims, the new world of higher education that is now unfolding offers both immense promise and great challenges.

On the one hand, the Internet and e-learning are enabling higher education to reach out, on a hitherto unprecedented scale, both to geographical areas and to sections of the population previously unreached. These technological developments have brought the vision of a global knowledge society appreciably closer to attainment. On the other hand, this vision will remain unattained as long as there is a gap between the technological “haves” and “have nots”. This “digital divide” will continue to widen unless urgent steps are taken to close it. Another challenge is that of maintaining the quality of higher education despite the rapid expansion and great diversity of provision, some of which is relatively untested. Moreover, related to quality is the question of accreditation and the recognition of qualifications, an issue growing in complexity as higher education becomes increasingly “cross-border” in character. A further challenge for distance higher education in particular is how to operate in a global environment while remaining attentive to the needs, capacities, traditions and values of particular countries and cultures.

These are some of the issues that are addressed in the present volume, which brings together a diverse group of experts from many countries. The contributions as a whole provide a clear picture of the challenges, problems and potentialities of distance higher education at its current stage of development and offer numerous practical insights for planners and policy-makers. The book is a joint initiative of UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), with which we are pleased to be collaborating. Both of our organizations share the aim of ensuring that the new technologies are used to bring higher education in a truly inclusive, relevant and equitable way to the people who need it. We hope this volume will bring that aim closer to realization.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Matsuura', with a stylized flourish above the name.

Koïchiro Matsuura

PREFACE

by the President and CEO of Commonwealth of Learning

After World War II Lord Beveridge declared that the UK's Welfare State should take care of its citizens from "the cradle to the grave". Others, with a penchant for rhyme, later captured the cycle of life in the phrase "womb to tomb". More recently Professor Arun Nigavekar, Chairman of India's University Grants Commission, introduced assonance with a cultural twist by referring to learning from "cradle to cremation"! Whatever expression we use for the life cycle, lifelong learning is a crucial response to the challenges of the global knowledge economy.

A decade ago I wrote this about the renewal of universities in my book *Mega-Universities and Knowledge Media*:

The term "lifelong learning" is now part of the vocabulary of the industrialized world. It describes the need for people to continue their education and training throughout life because they will face multiple careers in changing economies and enjoy longer lives in evolving societies....Most universities have reacted to the era of lifelong learning by adding new programmes and services for the increasing numbers of older people who seek to combine employment with part-time study. Special arrangements have been developed for these students but the core activity of the university, teaching to full-time young undergraduates, often goes on much as before (1996, p.7).

It is good to observe how attitudes have changed in ten years. The term "lifelong learning" has become part of the lexicon of the developing world; ICTs have revolutionised the university both as "idea" and as "institution"; private and cross-border providers are significant players; lifelong learning is both formal and non-formal; and the boundaries between face-to-face teaching and distance education are increasingly blurred.

By making learning possible anytime and anywhere, distance education is a powerful tool for supporting lifelong learning. Technology-based teaching is creating new educational systems that eliminate boundaries of geography, jurisdiction and time whilst integrating academic and real-world concerns and giving students more extensive and affordable choices. The key challenge for universities is to evolve from a teacher-centred model of education to an approach that emphasizes learning productivity — and to carry students with them. The challenge for governments is to develop policies for a world in which traditional funding methodologies and quality assessment procedures may no longer work.

What are the trends and issues in lifelong learning? What are the alternative models of lifelong learning? How does lifelong learning link with distance higher education? What are the implications for policy at the international, national and institutional levels? What challenges do developing countries face in promoting lifelong learning? These are some of the questions that are explored in this book, commissioned jointly by UNESCO and COL, in order to help policy-makers in Member States make informed decisions about dealing with the multi-faceted phenomenon of lifelong learning.

The Commonwealth of Learning is many years junior to UNESCO. Established by the Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987, COL is the only international, intergovernmental organisation of any kind that focuses exclusively on helping countries to use technology to increase the scope and scale of education and training. Technology has already revolutionised many areas of life and our job is to extend that revolution to learning. We focus particularly on the technology of open and distance learning because it has shown its power and value in many countries and for many applications.

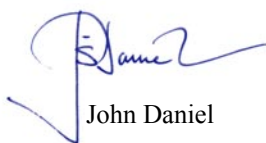
Technology has the power to break the insidious link between quality and exclusivity that has marred the face of education throughout history. Everyone used to assume that increasing access to education meant raising its cost and lowering its quality; that improving quality implied higher costs and less access; and so on. The revolution of distance learning allows us to widen access, improve quality and cut costs – all at the same time.

The staid language of COL's mission statement tries to capture this revolution:

Recognising knowledge as key to cultural, social and economic development, The Commonwealth of Learning is committed to assisting Commonwealth member governments to take full advantage of open, distance and technology-mediated learning strategies to provide increased and equitable access to education and training for all their citizens.

Having recently moved from UNESCO to COL I find that these two intergovernmental organisations complement each other well. UNESCO covers the whole of education, whereas COL focuses sharply on technology-mediated learning. UNESCO's 193 Member States represent the world in all its complex diversity, whereas COL exists for 53 countries, mostly developing states that are democratic and peaceful. A special characteristic is that two-thirds of these Commonwealth countries are small states, either islands or landlocked territories, in which the use of learning technologies is particularly helpful. Finally, UNESCO has thousands of people around the world while COL has a staff of only forty based in Vancouver and New Delhi.

COL leverages its modest resources by partnerships and collaborations. This book is a product of our close engagement with UNESCO and our common objective of ensuring quality Education for All. It furnishes a range of insights and describes successful practices for planning and implementing distance higher education for the lifelong learner. It encourages Member States to explore new and dynamic approaches in adopting the emerging trend of lifelong learning. Its aim is to promote debate and contribute to a culture of lifelong learning in our twenty-first century world.



John Daniel