

## **Report from the conference chair**

### **2nd Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning**

**by Tony Mays**

*Chairperson of the organizing committee, reflects on the Forum which took place at the International Convention Centre, Durban, South Africa, from 29 July to 02 August 2002*

Following an inaugural Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning held in Brunei Darussalam in 1999, the National Association of Distance Organizations of South Africa (NADEOSA), then under the leadership of Dr Dermot Moore of Technikon Southern Africa (TSA) prepared a bid to co-host a second Forum in South Africa in 2002. Although NADEOSA led the organizing committee and preparations for the Forum, the event was co-hosted and partly co-funded by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), and the South African Ministry of Education.

It was proposed that the 2nd Pan-Commonwealth Forum be held in South Africa in order to facilitate greater participation from within Africa, where many developing countries are also members of the Commonwealth but, largely due to their developing status, are often unable to sponsor participants to attend conferences held in the developed economies of Europe and North America.

The Forum took as its theme *Open Learning: Transforming Education for Development*. An organizing committee comprising representatives from the three co-hosts 'met' by teleconference linking Vancouver, Johannesburg, and Durban, roughly once a month over a two-year period. NADEOSA was represented by four of its member institutions – UNISA, TSA, the University of Natal, and the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) – and discussions were enhanced by involvement of a representative of private sector interest in distance education and open learning, a representative of the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA), the regional association of which NADEOSA is itself a member, and the guidance of our experienced event organizers, *Event Dynamics*, and exhibition organizers, *NichePro*.

The organizing committee was supported by the work of four sub-committees convened as follows:

- Finance, under the leadership of Jennifer Glennie of SAIDE.
- Marketing, under the leadership of Paul Beneke, in his private capacity.
- Programme, under the leadership of Anneke Venter of UNISA and Jean Grundling of TSA.
- Logistics, under the leadership of Trudi Van Wyk of the Department of Education and Fiona Bulman of the University of Natal.

### **Virtual Conference**

In order to enhance awareness and participation of the issues, six virtual conferences were held prior to the main Forum. Each virtual conference was hosted by a different member of the Federation of Commonwealth Distance Learning Associations (FOCODLA), with NADEOSA hosting the last virtual conference under the leadership of Alan Amory, Audrey Wyngaard, and Tony Mays. Overall, there were some 1,000 registrations for the six virtual

conferences, with 241 registrations for the final one hosted by NADEOSA. A report back session for these virtual conferences was held in the late afternoon of Sunday July 28th.

## **Plenary Events**

The main Forum opened on Monday 29th July with a moving flag ceremony and choir. Delegates were welcomed by the co-hosts, and the Honourable Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, then delivered a keynote address in which he outlined the role that an open learning philosophy and use of distance education methods can play in helping countries to meet their development goals. However, he cautioned that worthwhile goals could be achieved only if providers committed themselves to quality curriculum design and delivery, and to the learner support that is necessary to transform improved access into improved success.

With the Minister having set the overall tone for the Forum, presentations for the rest of the first day were centred round the sub-themes *Open Learning, the World of Work and Economic Development* and *Education for All: ODL and the Global Agenda on Poverty Alleviation*. Discussion on these sub-themes was focused by keynote addresses from Prof Malcolm Skilbeck who addressed the topic Investing in *Lifelong Learning: The Key to Economic and Social Progress* and Sir John Daniel who explored *Development as Freedom: The Contribution of the Open Universities*. At the end of the day, Jennifer Glennie led a panel discussion which created a link between the Minister's opening address and the sub-theme for the next day by exploring the topic *Improving Practice in Supporting Learners*.

The first day of the Forum thus explored the need for interventions capable of meeting development goals. However, there is little point in having worthwhile programmes if they cannot be accessed by those who need them. Accordingly, the second day of the Forum addressed the sub-theme *Overcoming Barriers to Access and Success*. The keynote address for the day was delivered by Prof M.M. Pant, who, in a sometimes light-hearted way, explored a wide range of technologies that allow for flexibility in providing and accessing learning and teaching. At the end of the second day, Glen Farrell picked up on some of Prof. Pant's issues in a panel discussion on the topic *Virtual Education: The Development of Trends*.

One of the major motivations for the Forum was the desire to create opportunities for networking, for consolidation of existing ties and forging of new relationships. Accordingly, the third day of the Forum was put aside for meetings (and a range of educational and other tours for those not involved in meetings). Officially, 15 meetings were held on this networking day, however the buzz at the convention centre on Wednesday was testament to the numerous meetings of a more informal nature that also took place.

A theme running through all of the discussions both prior to and during the Forum was an interest in opportunities and challenges provided by emerging and continually improving information and communication technologies. The fourth day of the Forum explored the sub-theme *Overcoming the Digital Divide: Innovative Applications of Technology in Open and Distance Learning*. Increased use of technology has made it possible for programmes to be offered that cross-national boundaries, and so it was extremely helpful to be reminded by Professor Jibril, in the first keynote address of the day, of the need for international quality assurance and benchmarking processes in his address on the topic *Globalization, ODL and the International Recognition of Qualifications*.

At the end of the day, Colin Latchem and David Walker led a panel discussion on a particular aspect of ICTs when they explored the topic *Telelearning Community Centres*.

For many delegates, a moving and memorable aspect of the day, indeed of the whole Forum, was the Asa Briggs lecture delivered by Stephen Lewis, the UN special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, on the theme *Development, Education and HIV/AIDS*. It is rare that one has the opportunity to experience oratory of such high order and impossible to identify a greater challenge that we must all work together to try and meet. Most delegates left this address in tears or close to tears and with a renewed commitment to fighting the pandemic that is ravaging the world.

On the final day of the Forum, we returned to our initial concern with the goals of education for development, by exploring the sub-theme *Open Learning, The Community and Social Development* and a thoughtful and insightful consideration by Prof Moja on the topic *Knowledge and Information for Human Development*. This led quite naturally later in the day to the last keynote address of the Forum, when Prof Gourley spoke eloquently and with great precision on the topic *ODL – Its Leadership, Management and Administration: Issues in the 21st Century*. Prof Gourley's paper raised a number of questions and challenges that delegates will need to address on their return to their respective countries and institutions.

Digital copies of the presentations made during the Forum are available on the Forum website, kindly sponsored by MWeb at <http://www.mweb.co.za/learning/colforum>. [*now archived at [www.col.org/pcf2](http://www.col.org/pcf2)*]

### **Parallel Sessions**

Approximately 200 papers were offered in parallel sessions during the course of the Forum, with each breakaway session exploring the sub-themes in more depth. Those papers which were received in time were provided to delegates on CD-ROM. These and other papers are available on the Forum website.

Also during the Forum, the winners of the NADEOSA Courseware Awards 2002 were announced. The 2002 awards process was managed by Norma Corry of the University of the Witwatersrand and supported by SAIDE. In 2002, the award was given jointly to The University of Natal and the Centre for Adult Education for: *Asifunde! Literacy Resources Courseware, and St John's Basic Home Care Course*.

### **Exhibitions**

Running parallel to the presentations at the Forum was a well-supported exhibition. We were pleased that among the citations for exhibition stands, the NADEOSA stand received a commendation from the organizers. This recognition was due to the work of Jenny Louw of SAIDE, who organized the NADEOSA and SAIDE stands on a shoe-string budget.

### **Social Events and Awards Ceremony**

Of course the Forum was not all work! A number of social events preceded and ran parallel to the main business, all of which contributed further to the networking aspect of the Forum. On Monday, the Minister of Education in South Africa hosted a cocktail party with the theme of South African art and culture. On Wednesday, there was an informal networking evening on the beach at Vetches Pier with stunning views of Durban's golden mile. For the more hardy delegates who didn't mind the wind (and the odd bit of sand in their braai), the evening, with its opportunity for some African drumming and

the chance to engage with other delegates in a more relaxed setting, was a great success. On the Thursday night, COL hosted the COL Awards Banquet. During this ceremony, South Africa was made proud by the award of a Commonwealth of Learning Fellowship to our own Jennifer Glennie, and an award for recognition of excellence in course materials to the ABET programme hosted at UNISA, and conceptualized and managed by Prof Veronica Mackay.

### **Conclusion**

In all, some 700 people registered for the Forum in various capacities ranging from full to day delegates to exhibitors. Although not everybody who registered actually arrived, the Forum hosted 12 Ministers of Education and delegates from 41 of the 54 Commonwealth countries (including all the Commonwealth countries in Africa) as well as 19 non-Commonwealth countries.

In the words of Alan Tait, during the closing session, the 2nd Pan-Commonwealth Forum hosted in South Africa was a 'world class event'.

The third Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning will be hosted in New Zealand in 2004 and our best wishes go to the organizing committee there. Closer to home, the Minister has announced that the Ministry of Education intends to host a distance education conference for Africa in 2003. So watch this space for further news!

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