

## **9<sup>th</sup> Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning**

### ***Innovation for Quality Education and Lifelong Learning***

Introductory remarks for the opening panel discussion by Sir John Daniel

### **Two Great Scots: Innovators of Principle and Practice in Open Learning**

Your Excellencies, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is my privilege to chair PCF9's opening ministerial panel. It is also a personal pleasure because the joint hosts of PCF9 are The Open University and The Commonwealth of Learning. I headed the OU from 1990 to 2001 and then headed COL from 2004 to 2012, so this conference, which celebrates the OU's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and COL's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, is very special for me.

Our panel's subject this morning is PCF9's theme: *Innovation for Quality Education and Lifelong Learning*. Since we are in Edinburgh, I shall introduce the session by recalling two Scotsmen who made stellar contributions to our theme. One first described the principles behind the innovations that make open learning possible; the second was the driving force behind an iconic innovation that combined quality education and lifelong learning as never before.

Our first hero is Adam Smith, a key figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, who lived here from 1723 to 1790. He was the first thinker to articulate the vital differences of working principles between cottage workshops and industrial factories. His famous example was making pins. In a cottage workshop one person performed all the operations required to make a pin, whereas in the factory three principles came into play: specialisation; division of labour; and the use of machines. These principles were the basis of the industrial revolution, whose economies of scale transformed manufacturing in Britain in the following century.

Yet almost 200 years passed between the publication of Adam Smith's classic work, *The Wealth of Nations*, and the application of his principles to the creation of a university. This was done by another Scotsman, whose dual aim – our theme this week – was to make higher learning accessible to people of all ages and to transform its quality. I refer to Walter, Lord Perry of Walton, who as the Open University's first vice-chancellor, designed the OU's teaching and learning system.

Walter Perry was a true disciple of Adam Smith. Realising that the success of the OU would depend on economies of scale and the high quality that economies of scale allow, he ignored the timid civil servants who suggested that he test the OU concepts with a pilot project of a few hundred students. Instead, he opened the Open University in 1971 with a first cohort of 25,000 learners, all admitted on a 'first come, first served' basis, without reference to their academic backgrounds.

From then on, the Open University was unstoppable, which is why we are here in Edinburgh today.

I share with you two comments Walter Perry made about innovation. When asked what was the OU's most important innovation, he replied that it was the OU course teams. Within them specialisation, division of labour and the use of media made for unparalleled quality in teaching and learning.

He also made the daring claim that the OU has institutionalised innovation. Today such claims are often clichés, but as OU vice-chancellor myself for the decade of the 1990s I found the claim to be true. That's because OU people live out daily the ambitious aspiration expressed in its simple yet limitless mission: to be Open to People; Open to Places; Open to Methods; and Open to Ideas.

The Commonwealth of Learning is another organisation that has institutionalised innovation and spread it around the Commonwealth. One of its strategies – programme longevity - may seem paradoxical. Other international development agencies tend to terminate their so-called 'innovative projects' after about three years: often, ironically, just as they are beginning to show success. Yet COL's truly innovative programmes, like Lifelong Learning for Farmers or the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, have been spinning off innovations for almost two decades. Today Aptus, COL's Classroom without Walls, continues to allow educators and learners to connect to digital learning platforms and content without the need for grid electricity, spawning additional innovations as it extends its reach.

So, as you reflect in Edinburgh this week on the current situation of open learning, remember that you are building on foundations laid by two great Scots and citizens of this city, Adam Smith and Walter Perry.

Now, I have pleasure in turning to the four distinguished members of this morning's panel, from the Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific, to share their thoughts and experience on innovation for quality education and lifelong learning in the very diverse environments where they carry out their work.

I ask each colleague to speak for a maximum of ten minutes so that you all get a turn at the microphone. What does Innovation for Quality Education and Lifelong Learning mean for you?

2019-09-09

