EDITORIAL

Celebrating the 8th Pan-Commonwealth Forum and Distance Education Leaders

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It is a great pleasure to introduce this special issue of *JL4D*, which continues our features on Leaders in Distance Education around the world but also has as its main focus a celebration of the 8th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF8), held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in November 2016. Organised by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in partnership with Open University Malaysia (OUM), PCF8 attracted 475 participants from 59 countries to discuss "Open, Online and Flexible Learning: The Key to Sustainable Development" through focussing on four sub-themes: Quality and Equity; Access and Inclusion; Efficiency and Effectiveness; and Technology and Education. This selection of the papers presented, now revised and updated, provides an illustration of the breadth and depth of discussion at the Forum.

Our first articles, however, continue our series on world leaders in distance education, this time covering the African Continent and North America, and are authored again by distance educators who are distinguished in their own right. (The first articles in the series, on Europe and the Pacific can be found at http://jl4d.org/index.php/ejl4d/issue/view/11).

Professor Paul Prinsloo, writing on Leaders in the African continent, is Research Professor in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in the College of Economic and Management Sciences, in the University of South Africa (Unisa). His academic background is worth an article in itself and illustrates the breadth and depth of his studies: he has achieved a Bachelor of Arts; Doctoral examinations in Theology; Honours in Art History; a DLitt et Phil in Religious Studies followed by postgraduate diplomas in open and distance learning and online learning. A colleague comments that he is "now one of the most well-known and respected experts in ODL, ODeL and learning analytics, residing in South Africa but reaching out globally via his most readable blogs, his Twitter account and above all his Facebook page" (Ryan, 2017).

Paul has been a pioneer in examining the implications of the use of learning analytics and some of his most recent research has focussed on the ethical issues surrounding its use (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013). Recently these include *Student Vulnerability, Agency and Learning Analytics: An Exploration* (Prinsloo & Slade, 2016) in which the authors examine the impact and scope of the asymmetrical power relationship between students and institutions in the context of learning analytics, and suggests ways in which to increase students' agency. Paul has also stressed the importance of supporting student success, rather than just increasing enrolments (for example Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011).

Paul's primary commitments are to open access, and to the ethical implications of our increasing ability to monitor student activity. In addition, his longstanding and breadth of experience at Unisa

and his collaborative and supportive engagement with fellow academics (evident in his article), make him the ideal guide to our series on ODeL Leaders in the African Continent.

Professor Mohamed Ally, writing on North American Distance Education Leaders is also highly distinguished in the field of ODeL. He is currently Professor in the Centre for Distance Education and Researcher in the Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute (TEKRI) at Athabasca University, Canada. Mohamed is particularly noted for his engagement with the potential of new technologies to enhance both learning and training; for example he was one of the Founding Directors of both the International Association of Mobile Learning (IamLearn) and the International Association for Blended Learning (IABL) for whom he is past Vice-President. Mohamed has also contributed extensively to areas, which are perhaps sometimes less commonly discussed in the context of ODeL, such as libraries (Needham & Ally, 2008); and training and development – he was, for example, President of the International Federation of Training and Development Organizations (IFTDO).

However Mohamed has probably made his most significant contributions to the development of ODeL through his seminal works on the use of mobile devices for learning and teaching, particularly in developing countries, and through his work on the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) (for example Ally & Samaka, 2013). The potential of mobile technologies for in-depth learning and teaching has been challenged (screens too small, infrastructure unreliable) but Mohamed's many publications on the subject have illuminated our understanding of what can be achieved, both now and in the future (Ally & Prieto-Blázquez, 2014). As early as 2009, Mohamed edited a book on the ways in which mobile learning would transform the delivery of education and training (Ally, 2009) – a book that won the Charles A Wedemeyer award for its significant contribution to distance education. But he has always emphasised that the importance of technologies is that they provide the potential to access learning: mobile technologies are important because they can both narrow the learning divide (Ally & Samaka, 2013,) and increase access (Ally & Tsinakos, 2014). This is so particularly in developing countries, where mobile technologies have bypassed desktop and notebook computers.

Mohamed's core interests in mobile learning for development and training, his Canadian base and his extensive international commitments in the field make him an excellent interpreter of the North American contributions to our series on Distance Education Leaders in ODeL.

The main focus of the rest of this issue is a celebration of the 8th Pan-Commonwealth Forum.

Some of the papers presented at PCF8 (all of which are available on the COL website[i]) were shortlisted for possible revision and publication as journal articles. I am very grateful to those authors who have been available and willing to take up the challenge of revising their conference papers for this issue. This has involved a considerable amount of extra work, as authors have included extra data, extended discussions, and revisited and revised their conclusions. The resulting eight papers in this issue (which have all been reviewed again before publication) provide a very small sample of the wealth and breadth of the discussions at PCF8. There were many other excellent papers presented at PCF8 and we hope their authors will consider revisiting their papers and resubmitting them to us. We are also very pleased to include an additional research paper from Raphael & Mtebe, whose subject matter aligns very well with the key interests of this issue.

As one would expect from such international participation in PCF8 on sustainable development, the papers cover all the main themes of the Forum and relate to many Commonwealth and other

countries: Australia, Bangladesh, Ghana, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Peru, Sri Lanka and Tanzania. In addition, authors come from most of these countries as well as Canada, America, and the UK. This provides a truly international perspective on open and distance learning for development.

Some of the key interests for sustainable development are well illustrated in this issue: the importance of teacher education, the creative use of new technologies especially where online access is limited, and the need for appropriate support and mediation, whether for teachers or learners.

The need for contextualised and localised support to transform pedagogic practice and make it more interactive is emphasised by Wolfenden, Cross & Henry from the Open University UK in their study of the use of a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) for supporting the professional development of teachers across seven states in India. A MOOC on teacher education, developed by the collaborative TESS-India (Teacher Education through School-based Support) was successful in attracting over 40,000 registrations and gained more than a 50% completion rate — which is extremely unusual for MOOCs generally. Some of the key elements that supported this success were contextualisation; for example, after the first iteration, the MOOC was presented in Hindi as well as English.

Professional development for teachers is also the focus of our second research paper, from Sri Lanka, by Karunanayaka, Naidu, Rajendra and Ratnayake. The authors argue that most reflective practice for teachers is left to chance and should instead be carefully designed within relevant structures and support. They illustrate the use of Scenario Based Learning (SBL) within resources based on OER so that these can foster the growth of Open Educational Practices (OEP). These results were achieved through the use of an online professional development course provided by CEMCA (Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia).

One of our case studies is also particularly concerned with teacher development. Stutchbury & Woodward examine the potential of video to support the professional judgement and development of teachers as well as aiding reflection on their performance. Their wide ranging case studies (India, Bangladesh, Ghana, Peru) illustrate the ways in which different types of videos can encourage change and development.

The context of learning for students, rather than teachers, is also emphasised in these papers: Mnubi from Tanzania reports on how democratically elected gender-sensitive student councils in schools played an important role in increasing young people's (and especially girls') self-confidence and self-esteem. This also led to lower attrition rates and a strengthening of school governance. Students felt able to report if their teacher did not turn up for scheduled classes or if they turned up drunk!

Students' experience is also of prime importance in the study from Jha, Ghatak & Mahendiran at the National Institute of Open Schooling in India (NIOS). This is a rare tracer study of students who had successfully completed their studies at NIOS and demonstrates not only the profile of students who enrolled (not as many seriously marginalised groups as had been hoped), but also how NIOS has enabled many former students to continue into further education or employment. It also illustrates the gender disparities in relation to those who were employed (fewer women than men) and those were involved in further education.

The creative use of new technologies for Learning for Development was a key theme for PCF8 and this issue of *JL4D* illustrates some of these innovations. Colleagues from OUM for example,

demonstrate how assessment managed through their new QBank examination system can make OUM more efficient and effective in Malaysia, as well as ensure the quality of their examination processes (Yusof, Lim, Png, Abd Khatab, & Dharam Singh). In another context, Ally, Balaji, Abdelbaki & Cheng emphasise the importance of mobile learning in Pakistan, where Internet access is limited; the use of "Aptus" – a local server designed by COL[ii] – can transform learners' access, interest and performance in learning. Ostashewski, Howell & Dron provide an interesting research study of the "MOOCification" of a particular course in Australia, which is offered as part of a conventional fee paying degree and also as a free MOOC. Perhaps of particular interest is that those paying conventional fees to access the MOOC as part of their course, did not seem to mind that other non-fee-paying students were accessing the same material for free.

Our additional research paper, by Raphael & Mtebe from Tanzania, relates to all the above concerns – especially teacher development and the use of new technologies. There has, for example, been very little uptake of educational technologies in the classroom in Tanzania despite their inclusion in pre-service training programmes. The study examines teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and the factors that are hindering usage, which include lack of support and perceived ease of use.

These papers, while providing only a small sample of discussions at PCF8, illustrate some of the core themes of the Forum. It is also particularly rewarding to see how the papers relate so closely to the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4: "Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning"[iii]. Enrolment in primary education may have reached 91% but 57 million children remain out of school[iv] and targets for secondary and further education are much lower.

Critical to meeting these goals is the availability of well-qualified teachers. Four of our papers are particularly engaged with the training and development of teachers in these contexts (Wolfenden et al; Karunanayaka et al; Raphael & Mtebe; Stuchbury & Woodward). Students' experience, especially greater gender equality, are also essential, as evidenced by Mnubi and Jha et al. The creative use of new technologies will be essential in finding solutions (Ostashewski et al, Yusof et al, Ally et al). In addition, our feature on Leaders in Distance Education illustrates the role these leaders have played in furthering our understanding, capabilities and capacity to address the issues raised.

Pan-Commonwealth Forums[v] (PCFs) take place every three years and their location rotates around Commonwealth Countries. This issue of *JL4D* celebrates the success of PCF8, organised in collaboration with Open University Malaysia, and the rich debates that were stimulated. We are very pleased to celebrate PCF8's success in this issue.

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Notes

i http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/2433

ii https://www.col.org/resources/aptus

iii http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/

iv http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ENGLISH_Why_it_Matters_Goal_4_QualityEducation.pdf

v https://www.col.org/about/col-pan-commonwealth-forum