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ADDRESS TO

**The Association of Commonwealth Universities
Executive Heads Conference**

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Hyderabad
India
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It's a genuine privilege to be invited to speak to you here this morning.

Since the subject of my speech is education and technology, I thought I'd begin with a story which a friend of mine who works in telephony told me just last week.

Digging to a depth of over 100 metres at a site near London, archaeologists recently found traces of copper wire dating back 1,000 years.

They came to the conclusion that the United Kingdom must have had some primitive form of telephone network centuries ago.

Not to be outdone by the UK, scientists in Australia started a similar dig in Sydney to see what they could come up with.

Shortly thereafter headlines in their newspapers proclaimed: "Australian archaeologists have found traces of fibre-optic cable, and have concluded that Australia had a fairly advanced digital communications network as much as a thousand years earlier than the UK."

One month later a newspaper here in Hyderabad reported the following:

"After digging to a depth of over 1,000 metres near the Charminar scientists found - absolutely nothing.

The only possible conclusion is that 5,000 years ago, local ancestors here in India were using wireless technology!"

Let me begin by reflecting a little on my own experience of leadership within the context of higher education. Eighteen months ago I was formally installed as the fifth Chancellor of the Open University – an institution which is justly proud of its engagement with the British Commonwealth, and we're especially proud that our own Vice Chancellor is now Chair of the ACU.

That day, during my acceptance speech, I tried to convey the tremendous sense of pride I felt, and continue to feel, in formally taking up what I see as an extremely important role.

The reasons are simple; not only is it the University that most closely equates to my own, rather bumpy, academic journey – it is also the repository of the dreams of hundreds of thousands of students across the world, who like me, thought that the very possibility of higher education had, for whatever reason, entirely passed them by.

During a career that's spanned a little over fifty years I've occupied myself in a number of quite distinct areas of interest, but there's always been an important connecting thread that's helped make each transition that much more rationale.

That thread can be variously described as the acquisition of knowledge, understanding or simply, experience.

What's certain is that everything - and I really do mean everything I've learned through my work in Cinema, for Unicef, and in various spheres of Government, has only reinforced my view that, in the words of the author and scientist H.G. Wells, the future really is a race;

“a race, between Education and Catastrophe”.

Personally, not finding the idea of catastrophe all that attractive, I decided some while ago to throw in my lot with Education!

The OU itself is of course a perfect example of the marriage of learning to technology and innovation.

Prior to becoming Chancellor of the OU, I'd spent ten happy and thoroughly productive years as Chancellor of the University of Sunderland in the North East of England. A university which, well before I arrived, was actively embracing technology; a university which saw technology as a bridge to a very challenged regional constituency that needed every scrap of help it could get.

A university which, from the outset, understood the potential offered by technology for enhancing access; in fact the possibility of re-imagining the whole process of learning.

In many of the countries in the so-called ‘developed world’, it’s increasingly the case that ‘disengagement’ with formal education lies at the heart of what we have traditionally thought of as ‘disadvantage’.

If I may, I’d like to focus this morning on the opportunities (and challenges) presented by digital technologies, and the manner in which this has given rise, not only to new forms of interaction and collaboration, but new ways for students of all ages to engage with and contribute to the creation of knowledge.

I recognise that some of what I have to say relates principally to ‘technology-enabled’ nations, which is not necessarily the case for every single country represented here today.

But equally I’ve no doubt that those countries who are only just beginning to grapple with the challenges and opportunities these technologies offer, will find themselves facing many of these same issues; and hopefully sooner rather than later – certainly given the current pace of global technology transfer!

Let me also assure you that we have absolutely no room for complacency in the United Kingdom.

For example, one in 12 young people aged 16 to 19 in the UK is not in any form of education, employment or training. Nearly 7 million adults have serious difficulty with numbers, and 5 million of my fellow citizens are little more than ‘functionally literate’!

The UK also suffers from a particularly weak take-up in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. According to a recent study by Universities UK, over 70% of postgraduate students in these key disciplines come from outside the UK. So we in Britain certainly have our own challenges to face.

But I absolutely recognise the emerging (and rather worrying) divide between those who consider technology an unnecessary disruption to their current way of working, and those for whom technology is an entirely natural part of their daily existence.

Here in India, for example, approximately 70% of the population lives in rural areas; and in those areas almost 90% of people do not own telephones, and over 50% have no form of domestic power connection.

Yet this same India has enormous strengths in the shape of its ICT sector and a large pool of highly skilled labour. Different challenges face other nations in Asia and in Africa – where the research base around ICT is for example, much weaker.

But of course, it's also the case that many countries which have traditionally lagged behind in the deployment of conventional ICT have the opportunity to literally “leapfrog” others through the use of mobile technologies which allow people to connect directly to the Internet.

By the end of 2006 for example, almost 70% of the world's cellphone subscriptions were in ‘developing’ countries.

As the internet increasingly becomes easier to access through the use of mobile technologies, so opportunities start to open up well beyond the world of delivery of broadband via traditional telephone lines.

But, irrespective of geography, there is no avoiding the fact that this new ‘digital landscape’ has significant implications for the way in which we engage, motivate and challenge a whole new generation of learners; many of whom already operate at the heart of what might be described as a vast and growing ‘web’ of communications.

This phenomenon was beautifully described at a seminar I attended in San Francisco last year by one particularly bright student who complained to his teacher that every time he entered the classroom he felt that he had to somehow - ‘power down’.

Surely, if we really want to understand the learners of the future, we should start by looking at their current ‘out of college interests’ and see how, in practice, these might connect, or at least become rather more connected to the notion of the ‘digital classroom’.

It’s increasingly the case that central to many young people’s experience of informal learning is the idea that it is collaborative; that it is ‘networked’; and that it’s embedded in the communities in which the learning takes place.

And here we are not talking about isolated individuals engrossed solely in a world of their own.

No, the truth is we are increasingly seeing young people totally engaged with learning in online and face-to-face communities; and it doesn’t really matter whether we approve or not!

And as a by-product we are also beginning to see them expect a new form of engagement with the world around them – and that includes the institution in which they are studying!

Students can now act as citizen journalists, using mobile phones to send in stories; they can shoot and distribute their own films and then share them with other young people across the world; they can engage with the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, or the ups and downs of an election; and they can do this through the use of ‘blogging’ tools, or through their own social networking sites; in this way they can connect with people who share their interests -irrespective of geographical location, cultural similarity or, before long (please believe me!) even language!

Learning, in all of these settings, is not just about ‘accessing’ information; it’s far more about creating new knowledge, creating new products, and even new resources.

In fact, the ability to change and contribute to their own learning environment is absolutely central to many of these sorts of activities.

Having spent the past six and a half years as the U.K. President of Unicef, being inescapably confronted by the colossal disparity between differing concepts of opportunity – educational and otherwise - in a world struggling to achieve any form of educational equilibrium, why do I continue to find these technological advances so important?

It's because these new tools offer the potential for genuinely transformed educational practice, wherever the ambition exists to drive it forward.

They at last offer the ability to change how, where, when and with whom learning takes place.

They offer, by means of simulations and augmented reality, opportunities for more authentic learning, and with it a deeper understanding of sometimes complex concepts; concepts which in turn help to inform the reality of increasingly challenged lives in all of our countries.

My fear is that, if we fail to embrace the potential of the information age, we run the serious risk of relegating 'formal' education, in every one of our countries, to a form of second-class or 'optional' status.

In fact, we could find ourselves with painstakingly constructed systems of education that are felt to be ever-more irrelevant to the very learners they should be serving.

And in this respect, I have another very real and growing concern.

About fifteen years ago, I stepped onto the stage of London's National Film Theatre, to be introduced, along with a distinguished colleague who is here today, Professor Stephen Heppell, by the present British Prime Minister; and together Stephen and I launched into a theme worryingly similar to everything I've been saying here this morning.

Among other things, we addressed the notion of 'digital natives and digital immigrants', a concept which later gained a fair degree of notoriety.

The oldest of the digital natives we were then describing would, at the time, have been about twelve.

Now you don't need to be a mathematician to work out that those same digital natives are today around 27, and a significant number of them are now teachers!

In many cases, they are wonderful teachers, young people who are at the 'cutting edge' of change in their chosen profession. These are people who've not only heard of, or even played an interactive game; they intuitively understand both the fascination and the skills their pupils gain from engagement with this type of technology.

It also means they don't remember a time before computers; for the whole of their adult lives they've had ever-improving access to the internet.

Technology for them is just another, altogether natural part of daily existence.

Most of them are 'technologically fluent', and it's as entirely normal for them to introduce IT into teaching and learning, as it was in the 'old days' (for most of us) to use an exercise book, and a pen or pencil.

But for how long will these crucial 'change agents' remain in a profession that at times appears unwilling, or unable, to deliver the nature, the scale and the pace of change that they quite reasonably expect.

Are we really going to expect them to sit around while we, the "policy-makers", sort out our priorities, when every one of them could so easily be snapped up and go on to enjoy 'golden careers' in the private sector?

But hold on a moment, aren't these the very people who are ideally placed to make a, or maybe even the significant contribution to the creation, the customisation and the constant improvement of ever-more-effective teaching and learning tools – to the benefit of every one of our countries?

These are the same young people who will help stimulate and embed the ideas, the products and the materials that will make the process of learning that much more meaningful, that much more relevant, and that much more engaging to new learners of all ages and abilities.

As someone with a background in what we increasingly term the ‘Creative Industries’, it’s my conviction that this virtuous circle will only be achieved through the development of the closest possible links or even fusion between what, for simplicity’s sake, I’ll describe as the ‘design studio’, and the lecture hall.

That is why I find it so encouraging to see hardware and software companies, big and small alike, represented here today. And tomorrow I know that you’re going to hear from Mark East of Microsoft, and listen to his perspective on the myriad ways in which the type of links I’m describing can be developed.

It is these partnerships that will enable serious progress to be made in the creation and implementation of the tools, the technologies and practices we’re going to need if we really are to revolutionise the way we teach and learn – and in doing so, begin to turn young people’s current disengagement into a lifelong passion for learning.

I said at the outset that it was an ‘honour’ to be offered the opportunity to address you. Please believe me when I assure you that was far more than a polite ‘turn of phrase’. The Commonwealth represents 1.8 billion people, that’s to say, 30% of the world’s population.

The very nature of the challenges we face as a global society imposes a quite awesome ‘responsibility’ on every one of us for producing the brightest, the most aware, the most imaginative, the most mentally agile generation of students that have ever lived.

A generation who, within their own lifetime will hopefully – with our help - have developed the intelligence, the desire, the sense of personal responsibility; along with the sheer courage and ability to help change the direction in which the world appears to be heading.

Aided, I sincerely hope, by the providential election of an American President who would appear to share the very best of the ambitions represented in this room – a man who is proof positive of the transformative power of educational opportunity.

At this point in my life I've been around long enough to know that a great deal remains to be done to make our education system remotely 'fit for purpose' for the 21st century.

But for all of the reasons I hope I've been able to adequately explain, I've come to the view that if we're to fundamentally get-to-grips-with, and exploit, the potential of ICT to forever change the face of learning, we need a new and far more constructive and collaborative relationship between politicians, educators and the whole of the technology sector.

We need to consider educators, technologists and, arguably, the students themselves, as joint stakeholders in the design and delivery of whole new learning 'environments' – environments which respect and complement the complexity, and the importance of the educational process; which exploit to the full the extraordinary range of resources that are now on offer (not all of which are technological); and which involve the co-creation of newly-thought-through educational goals.

We also need to work together to ensure that our education systems are equipped to anticipate and prepare for continued and rapid economic, technological and social change.

We are witnessing the emergence of a new generation of professionals with a deep and intuitive understanding, not only of teaching and learning, but of the role these new technologies can play in the lives of young people - both in their classroom, and in their home.

Our job must surely be to work together to ensure that an emerging and energetic group of gifted educators is not encumbered by the baggage of our past disappointments and frustrations; but is encouraged to take advantage of everything we've learned, and are learning, in order to achieve the best possible start in life for every single child on the planet.

Lastly, what makes me feel so optimistic?

A few weeks ago, in common with many of you, I found myself sitting in front of my television, in the small hours of the morning, with tears streaming down my face watching as a young, attractive and clearly intelligent black man was elected President of the United States. I was suddenly reminded of an earlier transformative event in my life.

When I was just 20 years old, the then President, John F Kennedy, challenged his countrymen to land a man on the moon ‘within ten years’.

Eight years and two months later, the astronaut Neil Armstrong set foot on the lunar surface.

On that day, the average age of the systems engineers cheering Apollo 11 from their Houston control room was – 26; meaning that their average age when President Kennedy originally announced his challenge was just 18!

Then remember that new generation of teachers I referred to earlier; and you get some understanding of the need to invest the very best of our young people with the moral and political authority to begin to lead us, and indeed the whole world, towards some form of tangible solution to the economic, environmental and societal chaos my generation would appear to have created.

We could start today by ensuring that, together, we commit to building upon the human potential of every one of the 1.8 billion people in the Commonwealth, many of whom would very much like to help us find that solution.

Thank you for listening to me.