

# An Open University For The Commonwealth

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—By Asif Khan

**L**ONDON—Such a university would have its own academic staff and award its own degrees and diplomas. It would probably be run along the lines of Britain's Open University—the first institution of its kind in the world—if the idea became a reality.

The British university, now nearly 20 years old, has pioneered a system which uses correspondence courses, radio, television and audio/video cassettes, complemented by summer schools which bring students face-to-face with tutors.

The standard of teaching is as high as in a conventional university. The university has more than 100,000 students from all walks of life and ages. The oldest student to graduate from it was a man aged 83.

Sri Lanka's Open University has already proved that British techniques can be applied successfully in developing countries.

The expert group is to identify needs in Commonwealth countries which could be met through distance education and open learning and recommend co-operative approaches to providing the institutional arrangements. The nine-member group has been brought together by commonwealth Secretary-General Shridath Ramphal after Commonwealth leaders at their 1985 summit in Nassau, capital of the Bahamas, asked him to explore the scope for Commonwealth initiatives in open learning.

Earlier, Commonwealth Education Ministers had said that the time had come for such initiatives and pointed to the use that could be made of new technology, including satellites, to extend education.

The Commonwealth Expert Group on Distance Education will look into ways of strengthening existing educational institutions and the possibility of creating new ones, besides considering new initiatives.

The idea of a Commonwealth Open University to take higher education to the doorsteps of people in all corners of the Commonwealth by satellite is to be examined by a group of leading academics. The group is looking at ways to spread education in the Commonwealth through distance learning.

The group is led by the eminent British historian, Lord Briggs, formerly Professor Asa Briggs, Chancellor of Britain's Open University and Provost of Worcester College, Oxford.

Its members include Professor Sir Bruce Williams of Australia, a former Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Sydney and a member of the Commonwealth Working Group on the Management of Technology Change which reported in 1985, and the Cypriot-born Dr. Anastasios Chrisodoulou, Secretary-General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, London, and former secretary of Britain's Open University.

Other members are Professor Akin Adesola, Vice-Chancellor, University of Lagos, Nigeria; Mrs. Marjorie Crocombe of the Cook Islands, Director, Extension Services University of the South Pacific, Fiji; Mr. Rex Nettleford, Director of Extra-Mural Studies and of the Trade Union Education Institute, University of the West Indies, Jamaica; Dr. G.R. Reddy, Vice-Chancellor, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India; Dr. Raymond Rickett, Director, Middlesex Polytechnic, London, and Professor Ronald Watts, professor of political studies, Queen's University, Canada.

The Commonwealth Secretariat commissioned several studies on distance education and open learning and arranged two consultative meetings in 1986 in preparation for the work of the Expert Group.

The studies include a major survey of Commonwealth experience

and collaborative activities in distance education, financed by Britain's Overseas Development Administration.

Britain's decision to introduce full-cost fees for overseas students in 1980 and similar steep rises in fees in other Commonwealth advanced countries have hampered the traditional movement of students within the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth's experience in distance learning goes back at least 75 years when the University of Queensland in Australia started teaching through correspondence.

Distance education has taken great strides in recent years. New technology combined with traditional methods has expanded the capacity of distance programmes to provide good quality higher education.

Commonwealth developing nations like India have pioneered the use of radio and satellite communications in educating rural populations and training farmers in modern agricultural technology.

The Commonwealth's two regional universities—the University of the West Indies and the University of the South Pacific, which between them serve more than 20 Commonwealth nations—have also used satellites to spread education to far-flung islands.

The Commonwealth Secretariat already has experience in distance education and launched several innovative programmes.

Its developmental arm, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, has assisted the development of distance education in the Pacific and for the benefit of Nami-

bian and South African refugees living in settlements in Africa. Mr. Ramphal, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, believes that the future of the 49-member association "may lie in our making it a true Commonwealth of learning."

He sees distance education and open learning as complementing student mobility in the commonwealth, not replacing it. Addressing members of the expert group at their recent first meeting at Marlborough House, the London headquarters of the Secretariat, he said that it was a good time to think about the idea of Commonwealth cooperation in this field. "There is a strong political desire to work together," he told them. "The field of distance education and open learning is one where our countries are rich in experience, where there are many needs to be addressed and where opportunities beckon. It is your challenge to show us the way."

Mr. Ramphal added: "Many thousands of potential students in the commonwealth may have future cause to be grateful to you. They have educational needs which, I believe, can be met only through cooperation on a Commonwealth-wide basis. "And this is where the idea of Commonwealth distance education cooperation through an Open University, or other institutional mechanisms you may recommend, is a potent one. It gives us the chance of matching the new techniques with educational needs." Members of the group are due to meet twice again, in February and May, when they expect to finalise their report. The report will be considered by Commonwealth Education Ministers when they meet in Nairobi, Kenya, in July, and Commonwealth leaders at their next summit in Vancouver Canada, in October.—Commonwealth Feature.