

49/2/2007

12

31

Commonwealth Shares Canada's Experience In Distance Education

Asif Khan

A GROUP of Commonwealth educators will arrive in Vancouver, British Columbia (BC), this month to study with the province's institutions promoting education through distance learning.

The visit forms part of a fellowships scheme which enables Commonwealth developing nations to share Canada's experience in distance education and to introduce the ideas they gain to develop their own distance education programmes.

The scheme also enables BC educators to visit other Commonwealth countries to talk about their work and to assist local institutions.

A bonus is the contribution it makes to the personal and professional development of the fellows, including Canadians, whose horizons are broadened by the opportunities provided by the scheme, the first of its kind in the world. The scheme is a joint initiative of The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), an inter-governmental organisation based in Vancouver, BC, and the Government of BC.

Fellows visiting BC this month come from Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Belize, Kiribati, Maldives, Malta, Nigeria, Tonga Tuvalu, Vanuatu and St Vincent and the Grenadines. During their three-week visit, they will take part in a programme of visits to universities, colleges and other institutions.

They will discuss with their Canadian colleagues distance education methods and techniques being used in Canada which could be adopted by their own institutions.

The fellows will also look at the work of COL, created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to promote human resource development in member countries through distance education.

The leaders asked COL to help Commonwealth nations make maximum use of distance education, particularly by arranging for courses and materials from one country to be made available to others and by helping to develop new ones.

COL launched the annual fellowships scheme soon after it started work in 1989 when ten educators visited Canada. They came from Brunei Darusalam, Guyana, India, Mauritius, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Tanzania, the University of the West Indies and Zimbabwe.

Among them were Dr Abdul Waheed Khan, then with the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), India, now on COL staff, and Mr Omar Khalid of Brunei, back in BC with his English wife Jackie

and their three children, for a Master's degree in education at Simon Fraser University.

The latest group of fellows brings to 50 the number of educators from 42 Commonwealth developing countries who have visited Canada, besides 16 Canadians who have carried out assignments in 17 countries.

Apart from one group which visited Ontario under a one-off arrangement with the Government of Ontario, all the fellows have been hosted by BC.

COL's president and chief executive James Maraj, encouraged by feedback from former fellows, would like to see the scheme extended to all Canada and other Commonwealth states. Similarly he would like more senior fellows to visit countries where distance education features in the education systems. The expansion would partly depend on extra resources being sought by COL, funded mainly by voluntary contributions from Commonwealth governments.

"This is one of our most successful programmes," said Prof Maraj, originally from Trinidad and Tobago, a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific and Commonwealth Assistant Secretary-General.

An evaluation by Dr Peter Evans, of the University of Victoria, BC, concluded that while visiting fellows enjoyed and profited from their experience, the scheme enhanced BC's position as a leader in distance and adult education. It also helped to focus Commonwealth attention on the province.

Susan Phillips, a former BC college instructor who organises and runs the scheme, said it benefited COL, too. "It is good for us because it gives us personal contacts in each country."

James Bizzochi, a Canadian fellow from Capilano College, BC, who visited Allama Iqbal University, Pakistan, the Open University of Sri Lanka and IGNOU, probably summed up the feelings of all participants in the scheme when he said: "It has been the most rewarding experience of my career."

He added: "All the vice-chancellors of the three universities made me feel like a guest and a friend as well as a colleague."

"I cannot begin to thank many others who helped me. Their professionalism and humanity impressed me very deeply, and I will carry that with me for the rest of my life."

—Commonwealth Feature