

JAMES MARAJ
1930-1999
An appreciation



James Maraj, who died in his adopted home of Australia on 3 April 1999, came late in his career to distance education, but once there gave of his best.

James had a long and distinguished career, diplomat and international civil servant. His career began as teacher and academic in his native Caribbean. In 1975, after a period at the Commonwealth Secretariat as Director of Education, then Assistant Secretary General, he became Vice Chancellor of the University of South Pacific, a multi-country university where he had his first brush with distance education. A spell followed at the World Bank, and then senior servant and diplomat for Fiji. Then in 1998 he was appointed the first President of The Commonwealth of Learning.

At that time the ‘open university’ movement was riding high and distance education seemed – at last- to be well established. So it was something of a shock when James questioned everything his staff – of whom I was one- proposed. After all, he was new to distance education. Gradually we realised the strength of his approach. He recognised that the methods had potential not only for education on large scale but also for small countries and specific purposes. He also recognised that COL’s budget was too slim for grand projects. Instead he opened doors –and here is political astuteness of immeasurable value- and took distance education in new directions.

He retired from COL in 1995 but then went to Mauritius as Director of the Tertiary Education Commission. His work once again involved distance education, this time its integration in the national higher education system. In 1997 he moved on to South Africa, and back to cricket-loving country, something which, with his Trinidadian origins, he had missed in Mauritius. Distance education was again his main business: he served as Special Adviser to the Vice – Chancellor of the University of South Africa and consultant to the Federation of Open Learning Institutions of South Africa. It was his last job.

I last met James Maraj in India in February 1998, not long before his first became. He had taken a delegation of South Africa colleagues to IGNOU’s international conference on Networks. He gave an impassioned speech on his vision of the future of distance education – apparently impromptu, but probably honed in the midnight hours. For that was another of his talents; he was an inspirational speaker.

By the end of his career he was widely recognised with numerous honours. Amongst these were honorary doctorates from seven universities, the award of Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur from France, and the Medal of Merit First Class from his native Trinidad.

He made a huge contribution to distance education. He made an issue of quality, doing much to give credibility to the new methods in countries where they were treated with suspicion. He brought into the limelight the cause of poor and small countries. He will be sadly missed.

Janet Jenkins

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