Opening Remarks

Africa and the Mediterranean Focal Points Meeting
Mauritius, 21 May 2014

Presented by
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Honourable Minister Bunwaree, Honourable Minister Jeetah, Distinguished Focal Points and Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure to be here once again for the Focal Points meeting. This is the second Focal Points meeting for Africa and the Mediterranean, being held in Mauritius. We are very grateful to Minister Rajeshwar Jeetah and his colleagues at the Ministry of Tertiary Education, Science, Research & Technology, for their generosity in co-hosting this meeting, as well as the previous one in 2011, at this very hotel. I would also like to thank Minister Bunwaree for taking the time off his busy schedule to be present here with us. Thanks to each and every one of you for coming to this meeting. I am pleased to note that we have eighteen FPs or their representatives from the 20 Member States.

Mauritius is a very important member of the Commonwealth. We were here in 2012, when the Commonwealth Education Ministers met for the 18th CCEM and both Minister Bunwaree and Minister Jeetah played a key role in ensuring the resounding success of the event. Mauritius has also been very consistent in its financial and intellectual contributions to the Commonwealth of Learning and we are very grateful for your support.

As you know, we hold regional meetings of Focal Points at the mid-point of our Three Year Plans. The first meeting in this series was held in Trinidad & Tobago in March. The Asian Focal Points will meet in Malaysia in mid-September. The final meeting for the Pacific will take place in Samoa immediately thereafter. All will be co-hosted by the ministries of education in the respective countries and we salute the Hon Ministers for their support.

These Focal Points meetings are very important events in the life of COL, which is why you see four of us here. This is usually not possible as we have only a small group of professional specialists, who we have so far not been able to clone. We have used this opportunity to organize other meetings as well.

COL has been working extensively in Mauritius with our local and regional partners. COL has supported capacity building at The Open University of Mauritius (OUM) through workshops on Effective Online Content Development and Teaching, OER, learner support and research skills. OUM also offers the COL-developed CEMBA/MPA programme. This is a long-term partnership and we expect to see OUM emerge as one of the Centres of Excellence in the Commonwealth.
Mauritius is also an active member of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. This is a consortium of 31 small states which has developed its own courses, two of which are being offered by OUM and one by the University of Mauritius. Mauritius Qualifications Authority, under the leadership of Dr Kailash Algoo has made substantial contributions to the development and use of the Transnational Qualifications Framework.

COL’s Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) initiative organized a number of capacity building workshops with officials from the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare and the Agriculture Research and Extension Unit. As a result of this training, officials have developed Interactive Open and Distance Learning packages as well as the first module of an interactive DVD based on the themes of the African Women’s Decade 2010-2020, which has been released by the Prime Minister. Most recently, the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare in Mauritius launched a course on gender based violence which trained 100 officers of the Ministry. In addition, a Capacity Building Programme for Officers in L3F was organised for the Gender Unit, Family Welfare & Protection Unit, the Social Welfare Division as well as the Women’s Association Unit of the National Women’s Council and the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare. Other L3F partners in the country include the Mauritius Food and Agricultural Research Council (FARC) and the affiliated Agricultural Research and Extension Unit (AREU) who have been working with COL to support new L3F learning opportunities for farmers, including the recent launch of Farmers’ Learning Kiosks.

A workshop to develop an OER Policy was organized by the Tertiary Education Commission with participants from the major stakeholders in the country. Participants from Mauritius are also active in our skills development network called INVEST Africa. This gives you an idea of COL’s work here and the extent to which you can optimize the use of COL expertise and resources in your own countries. I hope this meeting will trigger off the ideas to strengthen our partnership further.

At the Showcase event organized by TEC, three things emerged. One, that many more institutions and organisations in Mauritius are offering ODL and elearning programmes, evidence of the effective implementation of the national ODL policy. Two, there was much more reference to the use of OER, lifelong learning and sustainable development—which all links to the Maurice Ile Durable initiative of your prime minister. I also noted a more proactive role played by TEC in generating sharing and collaboration rather than duplication of effort.

What do we hope to achieve at this meeting? Let me outline five key objectives.

One, as we start our strategic planning process beyond 2015, we need to hear from you what your priorities are and how these will fit in with COL’s mission and mandate. We will be listening very carefully as you outline the key areas that COL should integrate into its plan so that we are able to address these systematically as we go forward. At the 18th CCEM, ministers commended COL on its country focus.

Two, this is also an opportunity for us to present a summary of what we have done thus far in each of your countries. You will recall that the current Three Year Plan started on July 1, 2012 and takes us to June 2015—we are now at the mid-point and would like to give you an interim report. The final report will be presented to your ministers in June 2015 when they meet in The Bahamas for the 19th CCEM.
Three, these face to face meetings are an excellent forum to remind you of COL’s purpose, its organization and its programme. While some of you may be veteran Focal Points, others may be quite new to COL and its work. Since you are our ambassadors in the field, it is important that you know what we do.

Four, as a Commonwealth organization, it is part of our mission to promote Commonwealth-wide cooperation. The Commonwealth is often referred to as a family of nations that works through consensus, respect and understanding. In fact the theme for 2014 is ‘Team Commonwealth’ which celebrates the spirit of friendship and the unity in our great diversity. These meetings serve to remind us of our shared values and our common identity as citizens of the Commonwealth. They are also an opportunity for us to network, and forge multilateral and bilateral linkages for future collaboration within and beyond the region.

Five, these meetings allow us to introduce our new staff to you. Just as some of you are new, we too have a policy of rotation under which old staff members leave making way for new colleagues from other Commonwealth countries. Let me then introduce you to our new Vice President Mr Vis Naidoo from South Africa; Dr K Balasubramanian, Education Specialist: Agriculture & Livelihoods, who is Indian and Dr Godson Gatsha, our Education Specialist: Higher Education from Botswana. Interestingly some of you may remember Dr Gatsha from our Focal Points meeting here in 2011, when he represented Botswana. This is not the first time that a Focal Point has become a COL Education Specialist. We have Joshua Mallet and Trudi van Wyk who have served COL and are now back in their home countries Ghana and South Africa.

Let me thank you all once again for your presence and for being COL’s voice in the field. Let me also thank the Honourable Minister and Ms Nirmala Nababsing for all her hard work in helping us to organise this meeting. Let me extend a warm welcome to each one of you.