

COL in the Commonwealth: Promoting Learning for Development



Minister's Meeting

18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (18CCEM)

31 August 2012

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*Introduction by The Honourable Burchell Whiteman, O.J., Chair,
COL Board of Governors*

Chairman, Secretary-General, Honourable Ministers, Delegates, Secretariat staff, officials:

I crave your indulgence for a special reason – just over a minute – a little longer than it took my young compatriots Usain Bolt and Shelly-Ann Fraser to win their three gold medals at the London Olympics.

The special reason is to formally introduce the first woman to head a Commonwealth inter-governmental organisation, Professor Asha Kanwar the President of the Commonwealth of Learning.

She comes to it after a very distinguished career in academia, open and distance learning, development and international relations. Her extraordinary management skills and visionary leadership have propelled her to her current position which she has held for three months to the day.

I also use this opportunity to thank Sir John Daniel for his eight transformative years at the helm where he and his Vice President for seven of those years, Professor Kanwar, made an excellent top team, creating many important innovations.

Now Professor Kanwar is in charge and already there are signs of new energy and the potential for a new trajectory as COL continues to be a model of three Rs and begins to strategize for the years beyond 2015:

- *Responsiveness*

- *Responsible use of all resources, thanks to the Board and the management, and an institution of*
- *Relevance as reflected in the tag line Learning for Development*

... headlining the Three-Year Plan 2012-2015 which Professor Kanwar will now present to you for your consideration.

Professor Kanwar ...

Honourable Ministers,

It is an honour to be here at the 18th CCEM with the Chair of COL's Board of Governors, The Honourable Burchell Whiteman. We are very privileged to have such a distinguished former minister of education of Jamaica as our Chair whose wisdom and experience is greatly valued by all of us at COL.

The purpose of my presentation is to highlight some of the main features of COL's Three Year Plan 2012-15 and to request you to ratify this. I shall explain how COL can harness the potential of technology to help you accelerate progress towards achieving the international development goals

We have given you two documents.

The first is *COL in the Commonwealth: Country Reports 2009-2012*. The complete compendium of what COL has done in each of the 54 Member States is a very substantial document and for that reason, we have placed it on the bookshelf of the Android tablets that you have received. We have given you a paper report relating only to your country. You will note that this includes summaries of pan-Commonwealth and regional work. I hope you are pleased with the results.

After the 17th CCEM in Kuala Lumpur, we developed Action Plans for each country in consultation with our Focal Points and other stakeholders. We then tracked the progress of these Action Plans over the last three years and the results are available as Country Reports.

The second document called *Learning for Development is our Three Year Plan for 2012-15*, developed after wide consultation across the Commonwealth and approved by COL's Board of Governors. By 'learning for development', we mean that we are promoting learning that results in a substantial and equitable increase in the number of Commonwealth citizens acquiring the knowledge and skills to lead productive and healthy lives.

As Ministers of Education, you face three main challenges within the context of the global economic crisis. First, you want to increase access to education and training for human resource development in your countries.

Second, you want to improve the quality of education so that the best outcomes are achieved.

Third, you want to achieve this at the lowest possible cost so that your budget stretches as far as possible.

COL's next TYP seeks to promote innovation by harnessing existing technologies to address the three challenges of access, quality and costs all at the same time. Technologies would include everything from

print which is still the mainstay of traditional distance learning to community media such as radio and TV as well as mobile and online learning systems. Let me demonstrate this with our proposed strategic plan in two sectors: Education and Livelihoods and Health.

The first initiative in the Education Sector is Open Schooling at the secondary level. Your success in achieving Universal Primary Education has created a surge of demand that brick and mortar secondary schools cannot accommodate.

Many countries have developed open schools which can cost much less than formal secondary schools. A study commissioned by COL shows that the National Institute of Open Schooling, India costs one tenth of what the government secondary schools cost per student. Likewise, the per capita student costs at the Namibian College of Open learning are one fourth of what it costs to put a student through secondary school.

COL believes that open schools can offer flexible learning opportunities to large numbers of students. This is possible through the use of Open and Distance Learning which uses a range of technologies from print to Web 2.0. COL will promote the development and use of Open Education Resources for secondary curricula so that when you introduce computers in schools, you will already have free quality content available and enhanced staff capacity.

Frances Ferreira, who came to COL after heading the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL), leads our work in this area. The focus will be on girls education in remote regions. There will also be an emphasis on secondary education not only as a transition to tertiary education but as a ‘terminal’ stage in itself from which increasingly, learners are entering the labour market. As such there will a focus on integrating technical and vocational education into the curriculum.

Our second initiative is Teacher Education. Current trends suggest that millions of additional teachers will be required globally if the UPE goals are to be achieved by 2015. Conventional teacher education methods cannot cope with the demand. Both pre-service and in-service teacher training through open and distance learning has a long history of cutting costs and raising both output and quality. COL will promote the use of OERs to support this further. COL will also use a range of technologies including Interactive Radio Instruction, especially for nomadic and itinerant communities.

Dr. Abdurrahman Umar, who was formerly the Academic Director of the National Teachers’ Institute, Nigeria, the world’s largest distance learning institution for teachers, is in charge of this area at COL.

Third, we support Higher Education, with a particular focus on professional education, quality assurance and the use of ICTs. Access continues to remain a challenge even though in the Commonwealth, the Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio over the period 2000 to 2009 increased from 16.4 % to 30.1%. A number of Commonwealth countries are establishing open universities with the latest being the Mauritius Open University which came into existence only last month. COL will provide the technical advice and expertise necessary to develop the IT, systems, build staff capacity to develop and deliver distance learning and provide free course materials or OER , which have already been developed by COL.

Madhulika Kaushik, a former professor at the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, is our Higher Education Specialist. COL will work with your officials to align its Higher Education initiative to the priorities of your countries.

Fourth, we are supporting the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, an idea that you conceived at the 14th CCEM in Halifax. It is not a new university but a collaborative network of institutions to strengthen tertiary education in the small states as well as to build staff capacity in ICTs. All 32 small states are on board and they have collaboratively developed several skills-based eLearning courses which are freely available as OERs on the COL website and are on offer in six small states.

John Lesperance from the Ministry of Education of Seychelles is leading this initiative, which now has a respectable repertoire of courses and a Transnational Qualifications Framework.

COL's emphasis will now be on the adoption and delivery of VUSSC programmes at scale through online technologies to promote eLearning and the sharing of free content.

The second sector of COL's work, Livelihoods and Health makes an equally important contribution to learning for development. As you try and tackle the issue of youth unemployment, COL helps ministries and institutions use technology-mediated approaches to increase access to skills development. Face-to-face skills training can cost up to 14 times more than distance learning approaches. We will use video programmes to demonstrate practicals but as technology costs come down, haptic devices will provide a real option for quality skills training.

Leading our work in this area is Alison Mead Richardson from the UK.

More than 500 million members of the rural workforce in agriculture have limited access to training opportunities. The Lifelong Learning for Farmers initiative has increased the rural prosperity of farmers not just in India and Sri Lanka but also in Kenya, Uganda and is now extending to Jamaica and Papua New Guinea. Farmers learn from experts using basic mobile phones in their own language. COL has developed a computer-mobile interface to scale up the learning. This is a model that can be replicated in different jurisdictions and we will be happy to discuss this further with your officials.

Leading this is Dr. Balasubramanian, a very experienced development specialist from India.

COL helps you use community media, to improve the health of communities through effective health messages and distance learning programmes. One such activity for Mother and Child Health has been implemented in Malawi and resulted in a change in health-seeking behaviours among the community.

The use of media for community health will be expanded over the next triennium. This is led by my Canadian colleague Ian Pringle.

Honourable Ministers, as you can see, we have seven initiatives that address key learning and development challenges in the Commonwealth. This requires that we contribute not just to the development of the formal education sector alone but to strengthen non-formal education as well to cover the entire spectrum of lifelong learning to serve the needs of a very diverse constituency. We are an outcomes-based organization that captures the evidence of what is achieved based on the principles of Results Based Management. The evaluations of our triennial work are available on our website.

In addition, eLearning and gender will be the crosscutting themes since they underpin everything we do

We get many requests for help in introducing eLearning from many Commonwealth countries. Our work in this area will be led Dr. Mark Bullen, a distinguished Canadian academic.

COL recognises that the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment are central to its agenda of learning for development. COL will continue to harness the potential of technology to expand access to learning opportunities for girls/women and boys/men, where they are most disadvantaged.

Finally, COL's team in Vancouver is assisted by our unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia or CEMCA. Under the leadership of its Director, Dr. Sanjaya Mishra, who has recently joined us from UNESCO, Paris, CEMCA will work to achieve the outcomes of COL's programme. CEMCA's expertise in community radio and low-cost technologies and models will serve to enhance COL's impact in the region.

That, Honourable Ministers is COL's programme. A focus on girls' education, skills development and the use of OER will permeate all our initiatives. We will work with your officials to develop Action Plans to suit your specific needs, within the limits of our modest resources.

Let me end by expressing double thanks. First, thank you for appointing Focal Points to liaise with COL. We have Focal Points in all your countries and they are very helpful in keeping regular channels of communication open between COL and your ministries. They will play a key role in converting this strategic plan into Country Action Plans.

Second, we really appreciate the voluntary contributions that you make to our budget. More than three fourths of Commonwealth countries now support COL. We consider this a vital sign of the confidence that you place in our work.

COL is your organisation and it works for you. It is small and flexible and can respond readily to your needs. COL is a world class source of expertise in open distance and technology-based approaches and in these times of economic difficulty, these approaches will become more important than ever before. Your support will be critical in making this happen.

On behalf of our Board of Governors and our staff, I request you to ratify our Three-Year Plan Learning for Development 2012-2015.

Thank you for your kind consideration.