

# *Connecting Australia and the Asia Pacific: Promoting Learning for Development*

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*Connecting Australia and the Asia Pacific: Promoting  
Learning for Development*

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## **Transcript**

Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Distinguished Colleagues and Friends

It gives me great pleasure to be at the University of Southern Queensland and I thank you for the opportunity to present the Commonwealth of Learning and its work. My topic is ‘Promoting Learning for Development’.

I must congratulate the VC Prof Jan Thomas, the DVC Prof Ken Udas, and the former PVC, USQ (and now PVC, Open University, UK,) Prof Belinda Tynan for their vision and foresight in convening this forum to identify tangible ways in which Australia and the Asia Pacific region can be connected. The USQ mission statement on community contribution makes specific reference to ‘supporting a socially inclusive society’ and ‘progressing regional wellbeing’, demonstrating its development dimension. Thank you Prof Thomas for hosting us and for your warm welcome. I must also thank Colleen Wilson, Debbie Morris and Mary Ann for their impeccable arrangements. I hope this conversation will be the beginning of a long and fruitful partnership between COL and USQ and will strengthen connections with the wider Commonwealth.

The USQ has always been a leader in open and distance learning and this leadership continues in the global OER movement with the OERUniversity, a consortium of 24 institutions and organisations around the world.

Prof James Taylor, another visionary leader, proposed a model of higher education that would open up access and cut the costs of quality education without cutting down on learner support or the possibility of earning qualifications. A model that could be emulated by MOOC providers, especially in the developing world.

Australia has had a long tradition of distance learning and was a consistent supporter of the Commonwealth of Learning until 2004. However, thanks to the support of our Australian friends, the Hon Kevin Rudd announced Australia's return to COL as a funding partner at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held in Perth in 2011. Prof Jim Taylor, Prof Colin Latchem, Dame Carol Kidu, Sherrill Whittington, Prof Som Naidu have all had a role in making this happen and we at COL are very grateful.

COL is an intergovernmental organisation, established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver in 1987. We believe that access to learning is the key to development. We are very grateful to the Government of Canada for hosting us and for its continued financial and intellectual support.

Your Commonwealth is a member of the wider Commonwealth which is an association of 54 Member States, that cover all regions of the globe. Your Prime Minister the Rt Hon Julia Gillard is the current Chair-in-Office of CHOGM.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of distance education and Information and Communication Technologies for expanding access to education and training.

Our slogan is 'Learning for Development'.

Following the ideas of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, COL understands development as freedom. Increasing the freedoms that men and women enjoy is a definition of development, and greater freedom empowers people to be more effective agents of development. Learning must enable people to exercise their freedom 'to be and to do'.

Prof Amartya Sen proposes the capability approach which helps us to see that learning and acquiring skills are not an end in themselves but steps that help individuals and societies achieve development outcomes. This approach encourages us to think beyond outputs such as acquiring a degree to outcomes—how this degree will lead to a better quality of life. It also shifts the focus from developing capacity to capability and to the question—now that we have the capacity, what will we do with it? We develop skills or what Prof Sen calls 'functionings'—how can these enable us to overcome the constraints of our daily existence and make a change for the better?

What are the capabilities that educational institutions must impart? Walker, who has worked on the capability approach and how it related to education, says 'If schools and universities are places where identities are formed, where we learn to be as well as to know, how much greater the responsibility for teachers to act and think about what identities and what capabilities to function are being distributed. (Walker, 2005, p. 109; qtd, Alan Tait, 2013 unpublished paper). Walker investigated the capabilities that girls in school in South Africa thought important and came up with three: personal autonomy and independence of thought; ability to enter the world of work and an identity and a voice that would get respect and recognition.

This is what we mean by learning for development. We believe that giving people the opportunity to learn increases their freedoms 'to be and to do' helps accelerate progress towards achieving the

international development goals and the Commonwealth values of peace, equality, democracy and good governance.

COL's work is located within the framework of the MDGs, particularly the six related to poverty alleviation, education, gender equality and health.

COL also supports Member States in their efforts to achieve four of the six Education For All Goals relating to access, quality, skills development and gender equality.

As the deadline of 2015 for achieving these international goals approaches, we find that 8 Commonwealth countries in the Pacific are still off track to achieve at least one of the goals. One country will not achieve at least five of the eight goals.

Technology and distance education have an important role to play in scaling up access to education and training. It is for this reason that COL has consistently advocated for the use of distance learning methods to be adopted not just for formal education but also for formal and non-formal learning. This is an important contribution that COL has made—to extend the potential of ODL beyond academia to the domain of development.

In addition, we have a strong country focus and we tailor our programme to suit the needs of Member States. We have an active network of Focal Points, nominated by Ministers of Education in 52 countries and this network not only receives triennial reports of what we have done in each country but also identifies the priorities that COL can address. The Focal Points for the Pacific identified their priorities at a 2011 meeting: the need for mlearning; capacity building in ODL and OER, flexible models for TVET training and policy support for teacher development.

The Focal Points for the Pacific also believed that COL should make TVET materials available; bring best practice to the region, provide technical advice and build capacity in Higher Education.

As a result of the wide consultations in all the four regions of the Commonwealth, COL developed a strategic plan for 2012-15. COL hopes to contribute to a substantial increase in the number of Commonwealth citizens who will acquire the knowledge and skills to lead healthy and productive lives. You will note the shift from developing the capacity in 'knowledge and skills' to the capability that Commonwealth citizens will have to 'lead productive and healthy lives'.

The strategic goals for this triennium include:

- Quality education
- Human resource development
- Harnessing ODL and technology for social and economic development

Based on the needs identified, the priority for COL includes education for girls and women, promoting the use of open education resources or OER and skills development.

COL organises its work in two sectors: education and livelihoods & health. These two sectors have seven initiatives and two cross-cutting themes. COL has identified five core strategies to implement its work:

partnerships, capacity, materials, models and policies. As a small organisation, each of these strategies helps us to leverage our impact.

COL's cross-cutting themes of eLearning and Gender underpin all our work. Let me give you examples of each of these initiatives at the global level and in the Pacific region.

As countries achieve success in providing universal primary education, there are still significant barriers preventing many young people from entering secondary education - worldwide - 71 million adolescents are not in school. COL works in 26 countries in expanding open schooling to increase learning opportunities for secondary education, particularly for girls, out-of-school youth, and people in remote regions.

In the Pacific, COL initiated its open schooling work by commissioning a 12 country report to identify the need for open schools. As a result, USP has established open schools in Tonga, Kiribati and the Solomon islands. Open Access College, Adelaide is poised to start a twinning arrangement with Vanuatu Open School. The 22-country consortium of the Commonwealth Open Schools Association has six members from the region which include Australia and New Zealand, an example of a pan-Commonwealth connection.

One of the key obstacles to achieving UPE is the shortfall in teacher supply in most developing countries. 1.7 million additional teachers will be needed if we are to achieve UPE by 2015! It will not be possible to rely on only brick and mortar approaches to address the projected shortfalls in teacher supply. Therefore COL provides support to teacher training institutions to strengthen and expand their programmes through the use of ODL and technology. In the last three years, COL collaborated with these institutions to train over 350,000 teachers in 24 countries. This figure includes teachers of marginalised groups such as the nomads in Africa.

COL's work in teacher education in the Pacific has been related to building capacity in Quality Assurance, Curriculum Development and MultiGrade teacher training.

Many Commonwealth countries in Asia and Africa are trying to improve the APRs in Higher Education. COL is using distance learning approaches to help achieve this. Just to take one example COL pioneered the development of a Commonwealth executive MBA and MPA programme which enabled our partner institutions to increase the numbers of trained managers and administrators in their countries. COL's work in HE includes leadership training and institutional quality assessment.

In the Pacific, COL's Legislative Drafting programme is offered through the Vanuatu campus of USP.

Commonwealth Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for the small states, a network of 32 countries. Seven institutions, covering all Commonwealth regions are now offering VUSSC developed courses. As a result of ongoing training programmes, we have built the capacity of more than 11,000 people including educators, policy makers and IT managers. We have also developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework to promote learners' mobility and credit transfer between countries and regions.

The first cohort of students of the sustainable agriculture course has graduated from the University of Samoa under the VUSSC arrangement and the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA) is very much part of the collaboration on a common Transnational Qualifications Framework.

This is Eunice Maganga, a young Kenyan woman, who has had the opportunity to gain skills for improving her livelihood through COL's work in skills development in Africa. COL builds the capacity of formal post-secondary institutions to offer new, flexible courses for people working in the informal sector, especially women. As a result, people like Eunice who leave school midstream get a chance to gain skills training. Eunice has always wanted to be a builder like her father. Eunice studied a free course in building technology, made possible by sponsorship of materials from local companies. For their practical work they built a staff house at the college. Eunice now works as semi-skilled labour and has increased her daily income by 150%. Eunice has enrolled for further studies at the college – which she can now pay for – as she wants to become a skilled bricklayer.

This is just one story of how COL's work impacts on improving skills and livelihoods.

\*The college is Coast Institute of Technology

COL has developed 5 courses in Basic Trades and in Vocational literacy and these are being used in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, PNG, Tuvalu and Nauru, training over 200 people in 2011.

Working with the Ministry of Education, COL supported a training programme on working with concrete. Today Nauru has 167 young people qualified to work with concrete as a result of this training, a substantial number considering the total population of the country.

Millions of farm families do not have access to learning in the developing countries. The present agricultural extension system based on face-to-face training is inadequate to address the challenges. COL offers a new approach called Lifelong Learning for Farmers, or L3F. It mobilises and organises the farmers and links them with banks for financial capital.

Here are the participants of a recently initiated L3F programme in PNG. COL catalyses the links between the civil society, institutions and micro-finance institutions to develop multi-media based learning. Such a linkage in which every agricultural borrower is a learner has led to vibrant entrepreneurial behaviours among the poorer and marginalised communities. This model, which was first successful in India and Sri Lanka, is now spreading to PNG, a nice example of an Asia-Pacific connection.

The Healthy Communities initiative, helps local organisations to create non-formal educational programmes about community health and development. These photographs are of a learning programme called the Bag of Life in a district of Malawi with extremely high rates of maternal and child mortality. The programme is a collaborative venture between a community network of some 15,000 women, a local health NGO, the district hospital and a community radio. The Bag of Life centres on 60 minutes of weekly audio content that combines information about maternal and child health, i.e. vetted by doctors and nurses, with the voices of local women and their real life stories. Some 3,000 women participate directly in weekly listening and discussion groups.

Our evaluation shows that 2/3 of active participants have learned the importance of simple key messages, e.g. to deliver in the hospital or clinic. In perhaps the most powerful illustration of the value of the Bag of Life, over 150 women's groups representing over 2,000 women contribute their own money to keep this programme going.

A similar programme is on offer in the Solomon Islands. Building on consistent advocacy and capacity building, the Isabel Province Government has recently accepted the proposal to support technology mediated learning through the Isabel Learning Network, comprising 8 village based communication centres including radio and email stations.

The use of technology can potentially be a game changer in a remote, linguistically and culturally diverse community like Isabel Province. If we look at the development of ICT in the Asia Pacific region, we find that even though access to computers at home may be only 28% and access to internet at 24%, there is steady progress between 2005 and 2011. This will escalate as we go forward.

In the mobile phone sector, we find a sharp increase—with 88 mobiles per every 100 inhabitants. Regarding the growth of mobile broadband subscriptions in the past three years, we find a threefold increase from 7 to 22%. Would this mean a growth in mLearning?

Our work in elearning cuts across all initiatives. The Commonwealth Certificate for Teacher ICT Integration or CCTI is an advanced course for teachers and school leaders in integrating ICT into school management and teaching and learning. This was localized for Guyana and is being deployed in 5 Caribbean countries. This model could have relevance for the Pacific small states as well.

COL organised the 2012 World OER Congress in partnership with UNESCO, Paris and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. We believe that OER have the potential to transform the way we teach and learn as well as to empower individuals to become producers rather than simply consumers of content. Many in the developing world are benefiting from the use of free materials and affordable textbooks.

The Paris Declaration captures the global agenda for action by making ten recommendations that relate to advocacy, capacity development, policy and research, areas that COL is active in. The COL website has a comprehensive set of resources, all in one place, that any policy-maker or practitioner can use, adopt or adapt. COL has developed a Directory of OER courses at the tertiary level with full open courses from Commonwealth universities. Nigeria, UK and India are among the top contributors.

In the Pacific, we have established a Chair in OER at Otago Polytechnic that is occupied by an illustrious pioneer in this field. We have an agreement with the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand to offer their Certificate in elearning to stakeholders in Africa and the Pacific.

COL tries to use technology to close the digital divide. Let me give you one example of a technology innovation that we are currently working on. The scene in this slide may be a typical learning situation for many children in developing countries. Classes such as these are far from electric power grids. Internet access is not even thought of as a possibility. Would tech-supported or e-learning mean anything in circumstances like this? (source of image:<http://www.flickr.com/photos/69583224@N05/8022556671/> --CC BY SA)

Our answer is yes. The sudden rise of affordable Tablet computers has made it possible to connect learners even in remote areas to experience the power and advantages of connected learning.

Today, there is enough computing power in Tablets to make them function as servers. They can run a Learning Management System such as Moodle. Learners can access materials in the server using hand-held tablets.

In the picture here, the white device serves as power source and WiFi hot spot for the black device which is actually a PC. Together these two devices cost just under \$100 and form the core of what COL calls “Classroom Without Walls”

Gender is another crosscutting theme that underpins COL’s work. Leymah Gwobee, the Nobel laureate from Liberia said that one way to stop the violence against women is to put more women in power.

Women hold just 20% of the parliamentary seats across the Commonwealth. In the Pacific, the figure drops to a mere 5 %. COL is in the process of discussing how to develop a multi-media leadership course for women parliamentarians in the region. This could then be adapted for other Commonwealth regions.

We have seen that through its work, COL has been promoting learning that leads to development, especially among the most deprived and marginalised. As the deadline of the internationally agreed goals draws near, the question is, what is the outlook beyond 2015? Will we have another set of Global Goals?

Civil society organisations and governments from around the world have begun to engage in the post-2015 process. So far over 140 goals have been identified and will need to be sharply distilled. Prof Jeffrey Sachs sums up the concerns best by saying that the emphasis will be on Sustainable Development Goals which will include economic progress, social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

The Commonwealth Inter Ministerial Group has identified a development framework for education beyond 2015. This includes issues of access, quality and equity.

What will be the role of universities and their contribution to the issues of access, quality and equity? One approach would be to re-visit the philosophy of open-ness with which the great open universities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century started. Lord Crowther, the founding chancellor of the Open University of the UK’s statement of openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas privileges flexibility, innovation social justice and inclusion.

But is being open enough for institutions? Or do they need to do something more to promote learning for development? To ask with Prof Alan Tait, how can this open-ness lead to learners acquiring the capabilities to exercise independence of thought towards empowerment? Or to have the capability of gaining livelihoods? Or the capability to achieve their full potential as citizens?

I hope some of these questions will be taken up as we discuss how to support the process of development and social change in the Asia-Pacific on the one hand and to realise the role of higher education institutions in the development process, on the other.

On that note, let me thank you for your kind attention.