

The Commonwealth of Learning: the Basics



Meeting of COL's Focal Points in the Caribbean Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago, 28-30 March 2011

The Commonwealth of Learning: the basics

Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning

Greetings and Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here. As you know this is the first of four meetings in which we shall gather COL's Focal Points together by region. Thank you so much for coming. This meeting will be followed by a similar event for the Africa region in Mauritius in May; one for Asia in Malaysia in September; and finally one for the Pacific in New Zealand in November.

These meetings have several purposes. First, COL wants to hear from you about the priorities for your countries in the areas of COL's mission. After reviewing the priorities of all Commonwealth countries we shall be well equipped to design a three-year plan for COL for 2012-15 that answers your needs in an optimal fashion.

Second, in order to set the context, given that some of you are new since we last held this exercise in 2008, we shall remind you of COL's purpose, status, organization and programme. I am starting this process now with a summary of the basics about what COL is; our Vice-President, Asha Kanwar, will follow up with an outline of our programme of work and then the two Education Specialists who have joined us for this Caribbean meeting, Dr. Madhulika Kaushik and Ms. Trudi van Wyk, will say more about the programme initiatives in our two sectors of Formal Education and Livelihoods and Health.

The third key aim – and we expect quite a few additional benefits as well – it to enable you to exchange with each other about the ambitions and experiences of your countries as they relate to COL's mission.

I've called this presentation *COL: the Basics*.

What is COL?

First, what is COL for? COL's purpose is to help Commonwealth governments and institutions use various technologies to improve and expand education, training and learning in support of development. And in the title of our 2009-2012 plan we summarised that as simply 'Learning for Development'.

Second, what type of organisation is COL? COL is an intergovernmental organisation of the Commonwealth set up by the Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987 and funding by voluntary contributions from governments that elect to support our work.

You will be aware that the Commonwealth is a free association of 54 independent states united by a common commitment to democracy, the rule of law and the resolution of disputes by peaceful means. Two-thirds of those countries, including all of yours, are small states, and that explains why COL – and the Commonwealth in general – has a special commitment to helping small states. COL’s key activity in this respect is to facilitate the development of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth about which we shall talk later.

Why Was COL Set Up?

The next question is why did the Heads of Government set up an organisation to help their countries use educational technology and distance learning? That’s a whole talk in itself, but three key reasons are that technology can give economies of scale, that is to say lower costs; it can reach people everywhere; and it is flexible and cost-effective.

How is COL Governed?

How is COL accountable to the Commonwealth? It has a 12-member Board of Governors; it reports to the Foreign Ministers Committee at the biennial Heads of Government meetings – the next one being in Perth, Australia in November; and it reports to the Ministers of Education at their triennial conferences. These are the most recent ones and the results of the planning which is starting here at this meeting will be presented to their meeting in Mauritius in 2012.

This is the first COL Board in 1989, when the Commonwealth Secretary-General was Sonny Ramphal from this region. Today’s Chair of the COL Board, The Hon. Burchell Whiteman, is also from your region and will be known to many of you.

This is the Board when it met at the Conference of Education Ministers in 2009. The person named by the Secretary General to represent the Caribbean region is a distinguished national of our host country today, Professor Clement Sankat, Principal of the St. Augustine Campus of UWI. The Board is the first part of the answer to the question ‘who is COL?’

Who is COL?

We are a small organisation with around 40 staff. These are some of the 35 staff members based in Vancouver and there are seven more colleagues at our Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) in New Delhi. Vancouver is our main office but our colleagues in CEMCA do excellent and innovative work with a special focus on Asia.

But COL’s great strength is not just our Board and our staff but our extensive network of partners across the Commonwealth, in which you play a vital role as focal points for your countries. One of your

functions is to remind your governments to make financial contributions to COL and we are very grateful for your work in this regard.

How is COL Funded?

One measure of COL's success is the number of countries that fund it. I stress that Member Governments fund COL on a voluntary basis – which is a good way of keeping an organisation responsive and honest. Six countries make the largest contributions to COL and have permanent seats on the Board. But what makes us especially proud is that the total number of Commonwealth countries making voluntary contributions to COL has risen from 27 to 41 between the last triennium and this triennium. That must mean that most Commonwealth countries like what we do.

But the real test of success is that as well as governments, our hundreds of partner institutions and the hundreds of thousands of individuals affected by our work also value our impact. Your work as focal points is a vital contribution to increasing COL's reach.

How Does COL Plan its Work?

We try to support you and engage governments and partners with a strong programme of stakeholder engagement led by our Vice-President, Asha Kanwar. This programme of stakeholder engagement centres on you, as the focal points for your countries.

COL aims to be accountable to each country so at the end of each triennium we submit a report to each Commonwealth country saying what we have done in that country. These are brought together for Education Ministers and Foreign Ministers, at the meetings that I mentioned, in a volume entitled *COL in the Commonwealth*.

Now we are engaged in starting the cycle again. As a result of these focal point meetings we shall develop proposals for action in each country for 2012-2015 and we intend that before we meet the Education Ministers at 17CCEM next year we shall have translated them, with your help, into country action plans that can serve as a basis for our work.

So this planning process is an important part of your role as focal points. We look to you to give us feedback; to see that our plans are aligned with your national priorities; to link with other ministries, since not all COL's work falls within the remit of ministries of education, and to exchange information with each other so that we can identify some regional priorities as well.

This meeting is an important opportunity to play those roles. We invite you to tell us candidly how COL's work is advancing in your countries at the mid-point of this 2009-2012 triennium; to make proposals for the next plan and to network with each other to spread the benefits of COL's work.

What is COL's Programme?

Professor Asha Kanwar will remind you of the details of COL's current programme but let me just recall that it is increasing opportunities for learning on two fronts.

In the first, we help countries to expand formal education. That means using distance learning technology in four areas: open schooling, teacher education, higher education, and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

On the second front we help to expand the informal learning that is essential for improving livelihoods on four fronts as well: skills development; learning for farming; healthy communities, and integrating eLearning.

What Does COL Do for You?

So let me conclude by summarising what you get from COL. First, COL works for you. That is why the Heads of Government set it up. Second, COL has strong expertise in learning technologies at a time when they are more and more important. Third, we believe in south-south cooperation and we walk that talk. Fourth, we are not a donor telling you what to do – we help you to develop your way. But fifth, one of the things we do contribute is models for technology use that have worked elsewhere and may work for you.

What Can You Do for COL?

In return, we ask you to engage in dialogue with us about your priorities; to track progress on your country action plan; to get involved (for example some of you are deeply involved in the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth); and finally to encourage your governments to make their voluntary contributions to our budget.

So I end by thanking you for your role in increasing the number of voluntary contribution. I look forward to working with you to make COL's 2012-2015 Plan even more relevant to your needs than the previous one.