

COL in the Commonwealth: the Revolution of Educational Technology



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PRESENTATION TO SENIOR OFFICIALS

COL in the Commonwealth: The Revolution of Educational Technology

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Transcript

Colleagues:

It is a pleasure to be here at 17CCEM with COL's Chair, His Excellency the Honourable Burchell Whiteman, to present to you the work that the Commonwealth of Learning does and to invite each of you to help us develop a relevant and focused action plan for each of your countries in 2009-2012.

This is a very important meeting for COL and we shall hold the annual meeting of our Board of Governors here on Saturday. Some Board Members are already here and I ask you to look out for them during the week.

In this presentation I shall explain the essence of what COL can do for you. During this Conference my colleagues and I will then try to get an idea of the particular needs with each of your countries and we shall continue this dialogue after you get home.

We have given you two documents. I hope you will find them readable and helpful.

The first is *COL in the Commonwealth: 2006-2009 Country Reports*. This tells you what COL has done in each of your countries since 16CCEM in Cape Town. After that Conference each of you helped us develop a Country Action Plan. This document details, country-by-country, the fulfilment of those plans.

We presented a similar document in Cape Town that only covered the Commonwealth's developing countries. This time, by popular request, we have a section on each of the 53 Member States. They are

arranged by region and we also give summaries of regional and pan-Commonwealth work.

I commend *COL in the Commonwealth* to you. I hope you will be pleased with what we have accomplished for each of your countries and that we can use this as a springboard to design a Country Action Plan for the next three years with each of you.

The second document, which is the result of extensive consultation and review, is our proposed Three-Year Plan for 2009-2012, approved by COL's Board of Governors chaired by the His Excellency Burchell Whiteman of Jamaica.

We shall ask Ministers to ratify this Plan at this meeting. It is called *Learning for Development*.

The centrefold page of the Plan gives you a summary of COL's aims and activities in terms of results-based management. It notes that working in partnerships is a crucial strategy: partnerships with your countries and institutions and joint work plans with UNESCO and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

What I can most usefully do in this brief presentation is to explain the essence of what COL does. It is all in the Three-Year Plan but for brevity I shall express it differently.

COL's mission, in a nutshell, is to help Commonwealth governments, institutions and individuals take advantage of the revolution of educational technology. What is that revolution? Let us go back to basics.

Your role as senior education officials is to achieve three aims. First, you want to maximise *access* to educational, training and learning opportunities. Second, you want to make the *quality* of that learning as high as you can. Third, you want to do this at the lowest cost so that your education budget stretches as far as possible.

At COL we express these three aims as vectors making up a triangle: Access, Quality, and Cost. Doing this highlights the challenge you face, because with conventional classroom teaching this is an inflexible iron triangle.

When you try to pursue any one of your three aims: wider access, better quality or lower cost, you will tend to go backwards on the others. Increase access by making classes bigger and parents will complain about quality. Introduce more learning materials – which are in short supply in many countries – and the cost will go up. Try to cut the costs of the system and people will accuse you of limiting access and damaging quality.

The constraints of this iron triangle have been the bugbear of education throughout history, which explains why many people think that you cannot have quality education without limiting access and making it exclusive. But a revolution is under way. Technology allows you to increase access, improve quality, and cut costs *all at the same time*.

By technology I mean the technological principles of economy of scale, specialisation, and division of

labour, as well as machines and media. COL is there to help you exploit this revolution for the benefit of your people.

In our new plan we have focused down tightly and chosen eight areas where technology can make the iron triangle flexible: wider access, higher quality, lower cost. Some countries are already taking advantage of this revolution in some areas. Our aim is to extend those advantages Commonwealth wide.

Those eight areas are divided into two sectors: an Education Sector where the aim is to strengthen, improve and extend formal education systems; and a Livelihoods and Health Sector where media and technology are used to expand informal learning.

The first initiative in the *Education Sector* is *Open Schooling* at the secondary level. This relates very directly to the EFA goals. You have now achieved considerable success in getting to the goal of Universal Primary Education. But your success has created a surge of tens of millions of youngsters and their parents looking for secondary education.

Since quality secondary education by conventional methods is at least three times as expensive as primary education, many countries will not be able to meet the increased demand. Open Schooling, which is much less expensive if done well, is part of the answer.

We believe that it is part of the answer not just as a separate national institution for rural and disadvantaged children, but part of the answer to improving all secondary schools with good learning materials and a mechanism for introducing computers into the schools in an effective manner. Frances Ferreira, who came to COL after a successful period as Director of the Namibian College of Open Learning, leads that work.

The second initiative, *Teacher Education*, also relates to EFA. Achieving Universal Primary Education, not to mention expanding secondary education, will require millions more teachers worldwide – and this is not just a developing country problem. Conventional teacher education methods cannot cope, yet training teachers through distance learning, both in-service and pre-service has a long and successful history.

COL is there to help you harness this approach to your teacher education challenges. In charge is Dr. Abdurrahman Umar, who was formerly Academic Director of the Nigerian Teachers' Institute, the world's largest distance learning institution for teachers

Third, we support *Higher Education*, with a particular focus on quality assurance in distance learning and the use of ICTs. A number of African countries are adding to the number of successful open universities around the Commonwealth and we are here to help with that – as well as campus universities that want to add distance learning, which is a bigger challenge.

Dr. Willie Clarke-Okah, a Nigerian Canadian formerly with Canadian CIDA, leads that work. He is also leading our response to the Secretary-General's request to put the power of the media behind the drive for

respect and understanding. This has three facets: one the large Commonwealth Open Universities are pooling their audio-visual resources on Respect and Understanding to enrich their programmes; two, we are conducting video interviews, some of them at this conference, with distinguished Commonwealth figures who have been personally involved in creating Respect and Understanding; and three, less developed so far, we plan to engage the youth of the Commonwealth in producing short videos for YouTube, on conflict, respect and understanding in their communities. Please help us to get the word out on this.

Fourth, we had a special session yesterday about the *Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth*. Your Ministers conceived this idea at 14CCEM in Halifax. It is not a new university but a collaborative network through which Small States work together to prepare eLearning materials in skills related areas as Open Educational Resources. This is groundbreaking work.

Less than 10 years ago MIT launched the Open Educational Resources movement by sharing its faculty's lecture notes on the web. The UK Open University followed up by sharing its self-learning materials. The VUSSC is creating a third generation of Open Educational Resources by developing courses through international collaboration

My South African colleague, Paul West, has done a great job working with the Small States to get us to the point where they have leapfrogged to the forefront of the use of ICTs in teaching. He has now been joined by John Lesperance, from the Ministry of Education of Seychelles.

All 32 Small States are on board and as well as a portal of courses they have developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework so that the eLearning courses can be used Commonwealth wide. This is particularly important since some small states are a special prey for bogus institutions called degree mills. I ask you all to be diligent in fighting degree mills on your territories because they do great damage to legitimate postsecondary education.

The *Livelihoods and Health* Sector, also has four initiatives:

First, we help Ministries and institutions use open and distance learning in *Skills Development*. Most of you are under pressure to increase and improve vocational training, both formal and informal. COL is strengthening its capacity to help you scale that up. This work has been led by Joshua Mallet from Ghana. A new specialist is coming from Botswana to take over that role in September.

Second, in the last three years we have refined our model for improving rural prosperity called Lifelong Learning for Farmers, or L3 Farmers. Our *Learning for Farming* initiative is already being extended from India, where it has already made hundred of women farmers more prosperous, to Kenya, Jamaica and Papua New Guinea.

We should be pleased to discuss with you whether the conditions are right for this to work in your countries. In many countries improving rural incomes is the key to sustainable development. Leading there is Dr Kodhandaraman Balasubramanian, a very experienced development specialist from India.

Third, COL helps you use community media – a much neglected resource – to improve the health of individuals and communities through effective health messages and education by the community and for the community. This approach has proved its success. It is now ready to be rolled out at scale. My Canadian colleague Ian Pringle heads that work.

Finally, we get many requests for help in introducing eLearning from all Commonwealth countries. In the last three years we have trained thousands of teachers to prepare lessons in eLearning formats. That work was guided by Wayne Mackintosh from South Africa and New Zealand. Another South African will join COL in September to lead that area.

Finally, COL's Vancouver team is greatly assisted by our unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Media Centre for Asia. Under the leadership of its Director, Ramamurthy Sreedher it works in areas of the programme I have just outlined and does groundbreaking work in the development new technologies here in Asia

That, Colleagues, is COL's programme. We ask you to choose from this menu in the light of your country priorities. Our Vice-President, my colleague Professor Asha Kanwar from India, will organise that process. Just last week Professor Kanwar was awarded the prize for Individual Excellence of the International Council for Distance and Open Education, a tribute to her great contribution to the field in India, in Africa and now at COL.

I end by expressing a double thanks to you. First, thank you for appointing Focal Points to liaise between your governments and COL. We now have Focal Points in all countries and they are immensely helpful. They will play a key role in translating the Plan I have described into Country Action Plans for your countries.

Second, we are most grateful for the voluntary contributions that you make to our budget. Well over two-thirds of Commonwealth countries now support COL and we consider this support, at whatever level, an important sign that we are doing something useful and helpful for you.

I end by re-iterating that educational technology is revolutionary. In these times of economic difficulty the only way to break out of the iron triangle and provide quality education to more people with less money is to harness the approaches to learning for development that I have talked about.

COL is there to help you do that.