

Commonwealth of Learning: Past, Present and Future



Board of Governors Planning Retreat June 15-17, 2005

The Commonwealth of Learning: Past, Present and Future

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Introduction

Members of the Board, Colleagues:

I am very pleased to speak to you this evening. These annual Board meetings are very special events for the Commonwealth of Learning. We would like you to meet more often and gain a deeper sense of ownership of COL than you can get from a single annual meeting, written quarterly reports and occasional contacts with the Chairman, the President and other COL staff. However, these meetings are expensive. Setting aside part of this event as a Board Retreat is one way of getting maximum benefit from having you together.

I shall comment first on the format of the retreat. Then I shall recall for you the milestones in our planning process. Having explained the process, I shall review the context for our planning. Setting the context is the primary purpose of these remarks, which I have called *The Commonwealth of Learning: Past, Present and Future*. I shall attempt a broad overview of COL to set the stage for your discussions in the retreat tomorrow.

Format of the Retreat

First then, what is the format of the retreat? Its design this year responds to your complaints that the retreat two years ago devoted too much time to presentations and not enough to discussions amongst Board members.

Accordingly, my address this evening will be the only presentation. Tomorrow morning will be entirely devoted to your discussions. I shall be on hand, with senior colleagues, to assist you if you need it but it will be the Board's meeting.

The Planning Process

Let me now turn to our planning process and situate this retreat within it.

As you know, COL works in three-year planning cycles that begin in the year of the triennial Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, the CCEM. Previous CCEMs were held in Halifax in 2000 and in Edinburgh in 2003. The next will be held in Cape Town in December 2006.

At each CCEM, COL makes a report to the Ministers on its activities for the last three years and presents to them, for ratification, the new Three-Year Plan recommended by COL's Board. For our 2006-2009 Plan the crucial meeting for the COL Board will take place this time next year. Before that meeting you will have a complete draft of the 2006-2009 Plan for you to revise and recommend to the CCEM.

That meeting is a year away so it is much too early to put even an outline plan on the table. Much of the value of this retreat is that it gives you the chance to think about COL's future in an open-ended way instead of reacting to proposals.

But we have not been idle; of that I can assure you. Indeed, I doubt that COL has ever done so much groundwork, so early, for a Three-Year Plan. I note five elements in our planning.

First, in July 2004, I convened an internal Planning Committee that includes senior management and most of our Education Specialists. So far it has met seven times.

Second, we engaged seven expert consultants to scan the environment in which COL operates in six areas of the Commonwealth. Their reports are a rich source of data and analysis.

Third, we have held consultations throughout the Commonwealth as my colleagues and I have travelled to different regions. Thirteen such consultations, involving 372 people, have generated 225 comments.

Fourth, I have travelled extensively in my first year in office in order to meet some of the key political and institutional figures around the Commonwealth: occasionally Heads of Government, always Ministers of Education, often other Ministers, usually heads of institutions. Some 50 conversations with such leaders have helped me understand how they perceive COL and what they expect from us.

Fifth, I consider that this retreat will give a vital steer to the 2006-2009 Plan.

We shall soon start to put words on paper with the aim of circulating a first draft early in 2006. This will be refined by correspondence and become the major item at next year's Board meeting. You will then recommend a 2006-2009 Plan for COL to the Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education when it meets in South Africa in December 2006.

COL: Some Key Questions

Against that background I shall now talk about The Commonwealth of Learning: Past, Present and Future. To structure my remarks, I shall take the simple interrogative pronouns: why, what, which, how, where and who. Please make allowances for the fact that I have only just completed my first year as president of COL. This limits my detailed knowledge of COL's history but gives me, I hope, the advantage of a fresh perspective.

Why COL?

First then, why does COL exist? Two trends converged in the 1980s. First, there was an alarming decline in the mobility of students between Commonwealth countries because of higher fees. Juxtaposed with the evident success of the new open universities this created a simple idea: if the students can't move to the courses, let's move the courses to the students. Second, there was a growing belief that Commonwealth countries could benefit by harnessing technology to education and training at all levels.

At the 1987 CHOGM, held in Vancouver a few blocks from here, Heads of Government established the Commonwealth of Learning to convert these ideas into realities and called for a planning committee. The key question it had to answer is well expressed in the words of the Chinese proverb: would COL give people fish or teach them to fish? Would COL develop courses and programmes and offer them to Commonwealth countries or would it help countries to develop their own systems for using technology in education and training?

The Planning Committee chose the second option. COL would help countries use technology, particularly the successful technologies of distance learning, to strengthen their educational provision at all levels. Our mission statement summarises this purpose:

Recognising knowledge as key to cultural, social and economic development, The Commonwealth of Learning is committed to assisting Commonwealth member governments to take full advantage of open, distance and technology-mediated learning strategies to provide increased and equitable access to education and training for all their citizens.

Is that purpose still valid? Some organisations solve the problem for which they were created and then close down. Others lose support as fashions change and their mission becomes less salient.

COL finds itself in a quite different situation. All indications are that our mission is more relevant today than ever.

During my time at the UK Open University in the 1990s, I was much more closely involved in open and distance learning than in my subsequent years at UNESCO. On returning to the world of ODL at COL, I am amazed to find how salient educational technology has become in the policy discourse of developing countries.

For example, in January I met President Obasanjo in Nigeria and President Kufuor in Ghana. Both are clearly convinced that technology holds many of the answers to the educational challenges their countries face. More importantly, both leaders were supervising personally the national mechanisms that they have created to give effect to their conviction. This is a general trend. The policy soil in developing countries is more fertile than ever for COL's work.

This is partly because, sad to report, conventional methods of teaching and learning have made limited headway in achieving Education for All. Leaders in the developing world still see a huge challenge of education and training in front of them and are turning to technology - broadly interpreted - to increase the scope, scale and quality of learning amongst their people.

One of the consequences is that developing countries themselves are beginning to assume the leadership in some large-scale applications of technology to learning. Few people in the richer countries, which have always taken their leadership in this field for granted, are aware of this phenomenon. As a consequence, some donor agencies are not well attuned to poor-country solutions to problems that rich countries don't have.

A topical example for COL is open schooling. Many Commonwealth countries, especially the most populous ones, realise that even if they achieve universal primary education they will not be able to provide secondary education to more than a fraction of the population through conventional methods. Large-scale open schools, like the National Institute for Open Schooling in India, are therefore of great interest to them. However, such institutions are not part of the thinking of experts in rich countries. This is especially true of those donor countries still focused on 'boomerang aid', where most of the money is actually spent at home finding rich-world solutions to poor-world problems.

What Does COL Do?

My next question is what does COL do? What should it do in future? I shall examine our work along three dimensions. First, what are COL's outputs? Second, in which sectors does COL work? Third, how does COL operate? What are our distinctive characteristics?

Describing the outputs is straightforward. The theme of the current Three-Year Plan is building capacity in open and distance learning. Its outputs are policy, systems and applications. Although we have recently repositioned the theme as open and distance learning for development, the outputs remain the same. Some continuity between programme plans is a good thing and these three outputs could provide it.

I share my colleagues' conviction that we must urge countries to lay down policy before they rush into harnessing technology to learning. Policy frameworks help to define the systems and applications needed. Helping to create, embed and improve these systems and applications is then an important function for COL.

Which Sectors?

Policies, systems and applications are abstract concepts but using technology to expand learning must be done in the real world. Learning about what? Which sectors should COL work in? Over the last year, we have put a stronger focus on learning for development; notably in support of the Millennium Development Goals. By this we mean not only learning directly related to a particular MDG target but also learning that addresses the new challenges created when MDG targets are hit.

Open schooling is a good example. The MDG target focuses on primary education. We are engaged in the huge task of training and retraining primary teachers but we do not see a major role for ODL with primary schoolchildren. However, achieving the MDG for primary education will send a tidal wave of children towards secondary school. New approaches will be needed, which is why COL is helping open schools to improve and expand.

At the moment COL has activities in support of each of the eight MDGs: poverty and hunger; primary education; gender equality; the three areas of health; environmental sustainability and the global partnership. In the next Three-Year Plan we might want to group these into three broad sectors, which could be:

Poverty eradication, agriculture, environment and health;

Education, gender and literacy; and

Democracy, good governance and civil society.

These are natural groupings and COL sometimes uses similar working methods within each group; for example media empowerment in both health and agriculture.

We should value your advice on where to put our energies in the next three years. I hope you will agree, after reading our reports to the Board, that our contributions in agriculture, environment and health are particularly promising and show excellent synergy with the work of other agencies.

How Does COL Operate?

My next question is how does COL operate? This needs a longer answer but it goes to the heart of COL's uniqueness. First, as you might expect, our cycle of activities resembles those of other agencies. We can identify seven steps:

Situational analysis (commissioning of studies or research);

Getting people together (variously called meetings, conferences, institutes, symposia, workshops, forums, round tables or seminars);

Initiating programmes (which means planning; writing contracts, agreements and MoUs; and creating collaborative networks);

Operation and implementation (including training, supervisory visits, using regional centres and travel);

Outcomes (sometimes conventional written outcomes, but also self-sustaining activities in institutions and communities);

Recognition and achievement (such as the COL awards and grants); and

Evaluation and reflection (assessing the outcomes of our work and drawing lessons from them).

Of more interest than this fairly standard cycle of activities are COL's special qualities. I hope that Members of the Board can understand and value what I consider to be our distinctive ways of working.

Our first quality is concrete action. Recently a Minister of Education said to me, "what we appreciate about COL is that you are surgical". She then used a rather alarming metaphor from obesity treatment; saying that COL stapled your stomach whereas the big agencies put you on a diet.

This is linked to a second quality. COL is small and free of hierarchy. My colleagues can make decisions and act on them quickly. I give the example of visiting The Gambia in January. The Minister of Education wanted to prepare policies and structures for expanding and integrating ODL activities and asked COL to give the process momentum by organising a national forum to assist policy making and create capacity. We held that Forum in Banjul just three months later, in April, and the policy is now finished. I doubt that any other agency could have acted so quickly. We are now accompanying The Gambia on its journey.

A third quality is that Results Based Management, which we adopted for the current plan in 2003, has sharpened COL's operational processes. Senior management do not micromanage. COL's specialists and their support teams work in an autonomous manner on a business plan approved after critical appraisal at the start of the year in July. We now have four progress meetings throughout the year and complete an outturn in April.

Speed reflects several other qualities. The fourth is the competence and experience of our staff. All of my colleagues command respect at senior levels in their specialist areas. They can assess a situation rapidly, provide good advice and then roll up their sleeves to make things happen on the ground.

The fifth quality, which has struck me as invaluable during my country visits this year, is the span of our contacts. Bigger agencies have directors-general who see heads of government, assistant directors-general who might call on ministers, directors who would talk to programme directors, and so on. COL kaleidoscopes these contacts with a single individual. On some visits I meet the president or prime minister, spend time with other ministers, talk to heads of institutions, visit NGOs and also work with those responsible for COL activities in the field. Visits by my colleagues follow a similar pattern. They can be talking to the Minister of Education one day and addressing truckers about AIDS at a remote truck

stop in the middle of the country the next.

I speak here about what you might call - although we don't - COL headquarters staff. Another advantage of our small size is that we don't have the tensions and differences of perception that can exist in bigger agencies between headquarters and field staff. At COL headquarters people and field people are the same people.

Apart from using our time efficiently, the broad span of contacts that each of us makes helps both COL and the country achieve joined-up management. When we talk about COL as a catalyst for cooperation we often mean cooperation between the ministries or institutions within a particular country, not only between countries. The obverse of the coin is that since the same individual hears a range of viewpoints we usually acquire a profound and nuanced understanding of people and situations. My colleagues also believe - and their believing it helps to make it true - that COL represents development with a human face and development that hears the voice of the poor.

This broad span of contacts partly explains another remarkable feature of COL, which is its ability to create networks of allies within countries and to get experts to work for us enthusiastically for a fraction of the rate they would charge to any other agency. A striking example is the priceless network of expertise that has grown up around our Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme both in India, where it started, and now across the world. Another example is the Pacific Association for Technical and Vocational Education and Training. COL helped to create PATVET but it now flies with its own wings and is doing great work in Oceania.

A final quality is our highly credible expertise. I refer not only to our staff, but to our expertise in Knowledge Management that has created our Knowledge Finder system and an Information Resources Centre that is the envy of other agencies. As a source of information about technology-mediated education COL is unrivalled.

One consequence of these qualities is that although we are an intergovernmental agency, governments are generally relaxed about letting us work directly with people and organisations to get things done. Because we are small, because they trust us, because we are not a funding agency, because we deliver on our promises, governments do not act as gatekeepers for our work in the way they might with other agencies.

Sometimes our work has impact solely within one country but often it engages the wider Commonwealth. We are very connected to the grassroots. Sometimes I think that a particular combination of organisations could have worked together successfully without involving COL, but I have come to accept that the organisations themselves find that COL brings credibility, contacts and continuity to their enterprise.

The net result is that COL relies more than other agencies on the work of ordinary local people. A corollary is a natural emphasis on South-South cooperation. For this reason I suspect, although I don't think we can yet prove, that our outputs are more self-sustaining. But our ambitions are higher than sustainability. In our Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme we aim not for sustainability but for self-replication. We are developing our evaluation framework and will report to the Board next year on our

effectiveness and impact in the current plan.

Looking to the 2006-2009 Plan, the 'how' of COL's work does not lend itself to the neat distinctions that I gave you for the 'what' of outcomes and the 'which' of sectors of activity. However, five ways of working seem particularly productive for COL.

1. Partnerships and Alliances: these include formal links with international agencies such as the Commonwealth Secretariat, the CTO, WHO, UNESCO and WIPO; the support of professional associations such as PATVET; partnerships with NGOs (as in COL's HIV/AIDS work) and the creation of coalitions (as in the Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme, the development of quality guidelines for teacher education and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth).
2. Sharing Knowledge: this includes the creation and international use of new higher education programmes (e.g., Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme); development of curriculum materials (e.g., STAMP, Environment courses); and making available electronic databases and Learning Object Repositories.
3. Equipping and Training Organisations: this important capacity-building function should have a particular focus on areas of special importance for development or institutional reinforcement (such as HIV/AIDS; quality assurance; open schooling; Schoolnets; eLearning; farmers groups). Its scope encompasses the whole development cycle.
4. Guiding and Nurturing: All development agencies learn the value of staying the course. We may not have the resources to follow-up on all initiatives that we help to start but in the most important ones we accompany our partners on their journey.
5. Evaluating and Learning Lessons: We do this not just for ourselves. I see a role for COL in assessing programmes and initiatives, noting their strengths and the weaknesses and advising accordingly. This will foster greater acceptance of the contribution of open and distance learning to development in an increasingly chaotic and competitive world.

Here again, we should value your views on COL's special strengths - what in business would be called our 'unique selling points' - and the modes of operation that strike you as most important.

Where Should COL Work?

My next interrogative pronoun is 'where'. Where should COL work? Obviously we work in Commonwealth countries - but without petty exclusivity. The main groupings of Commonwealth countries: Caribbean, Pacific, Southern Africa, West Africa, East Africa, South Asia - all include non-Commonwealth countries. We work quite happily in these groupings. Although we do not spend COL funds in non-Commonwealth countries we are pleased to let them take advantage of our products and services if there is no cost to COL.

A simple question for you is whether we should discriminate between those Commonwealth countries that contribute to our budget and those that do not. The three intergovernmental bodies of the Commonwealth answer this question differently.

The Commonwealth Secretariat receives assessed contributions from all Member States. They probably don't all pay up every year but the Secretariat, in its political role, works on behalf of all of them.

The Commonwealth Foundation operates on contributions from Member States and does not spend money in those countries that do not contribute.

COL operates on the basis of voluntary contributions. Between July 1, 2003 and June 1, 2005, some 27 Member States contributed to our budget. However, in responding to requests from countries for help COL has always been 'contribution blind'. We do not ask whether the country has contributed to our budget before getting down to work.

Does the Board think this is appropriate? I am not particularly bothered by the very small states, which have all kinds of challenges including natural disasters. However, when larger states take advantage of COL's services without contributing to its budget, it creates a sense of injustice amongst the contributors. My strategy, with the sterling help of Brian Long, is to be more assertive with governments about the need for contributions.

As you know, I arrived at COL just after Australia had announced that it would no longer fund COL. Since then Rod Tyrer and I have had discussions with Australia and we are making proposals for them to fund COL's work in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. So far the noises have been positive and I hope that this may be a route back to some funding from Australia. We must also talk to the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, because Australia has stated recently that it considers that it funds COL through that route, which was news to me.

I am fairly satisfied with the outcomes of our more robust dialogues with the non-contributing Member States in which COL works. Before the end of the year we shall have had new contributions from Fiji, Kiribati and Vanuatu. Bangladesh will contribute again for the first time since 1996, Pakistan for the first time since 1995 and Ghana for the first time since 2002. South Africa has increased its contribution so as to qualify for the sixth place on the Board for a major donor. With those additional contributions only one sizeable developing Member State where there is significant COL activity is still not making a contribution. Some countries, of course, make non-trivial 'in-kind' contributions to COL's work. I appreciate those contributions but even a small agency cannot sustain itself on in-kind contributions.

Who Funds COL?

I come finally to the question 'who'. I shall ask three questions under this heading. First, who funds COL? Second, with whom does COL work? Third, who works for COL?

I begin with who funds COL? We are an intergovernmental agency funded by the voluntary contributions

of Member States. This is not a satisfactory situation, but then, as the history of the American contributions to the UN shows, there is no perfect way of funding intergovernmental or multilateral bodies. With assessed contributions Member States may feel that they are being asked for more than their fair share, especially if the agency does things they dislike. In this respect voluntary contributions are more satisfactory. The problem there is the temptation to freeload; to accept the benefits of the organisation without contributing to it.

I have yet to attend a Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers where COL's budget is set and pledges are made. To judge by the result, the process is unsatisfactorily ambiguous. For over ten years now the Ministers have approved an annual budget for COL of Cdn\$9 million but this has never been achieved. Frameworks setting out the levels of contributions of various tiers of Member States needed to make up \$9 million have also been approved by the Ministers. Sadly, when they get back home too many Ministers either fail to contribute at all or contribute at significantly lower levels than those they had agreed to.

When this contradiction is pointed out COL is often advised airily to 'raise extrabudgetary funds'. We do that, but after leading COL for a year I see a contradiction there too, which is being aggravated by three trends.

The first trend, which I support, is that you, as COL's Board, are asking for a focused programme of work. The programme for the present triennium is more coherent than its predecessor and the Plan for the 2006-2009 exercise will be sharper still.

Unfortunately, the more focused our programme, the harder it is to do extrabudgetary work without programme drift. In previous years COL has executed various projects for the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Their content is not defined by COL's approved programme, but by lengthy and non-transparent interactions between the ADB and its Members. Even those projects that fit within COL's areas of expertise and are rarely a good fit with our approved programme.

Ideally, if you as the Board have approved a programme for COL that matches the priorities of Member States, then some of those Member States should be prepared to inject additional funds, on an occasional basis, in support of work they particularly value.

With the development agencies, however, we fall foul of another trend that gives them less and less latitude to commission work through an agency like COL. On the one hand, the agencies are engaged in a laudable process of decentralising their funds to developing countries, ideally as budget support to governments. Accessing those funds is not straightforward. On the other hand, of course, some agencies still give more 'boomerang' aid than they like to admit. COL cannot disguise itself as a Canadian or Australian NGO.

The third trend is the increasing numbers of consulting firms that exist solely to bid on development contracts. They do not have a programme of work approved by an intergovernmental board but can follow the trends of the day in an opportunistic manner. They are geared up to handle the opportunity

costs of bidding on projects, which are high because only 20% of bids succeed and the process of awarding contracts seems all too subject to political interference.

There is also a risk in contract work that conflicts of interest could undermine the trust that COL has developed with Ministers. If, in fulfilling its role as an intergovernmental body, COL advises a government on policy and systems for technology-mediated education it cannot, without conflict of interest, then bid on a contract to implement those policies and systems.

On this topic I simply conclude that my colleagues and I spend an inordinate amount of time attempting to raise funds by badgering governments to fulfil their pledges and writing project proposals, when we could be implementing the programme.

With Whom Does COL Work?

In posing the question, with whom does COL work, I shall talk only about other intergovernmental agencies because I have already mentioned our extensive partnerships with institutions and NGOs. We are putting increasing emphasis on making formal general agreements with other agencies, notably the UN agencies. I know that the Member States, which fund these agencies as well as COL, like to see us working together productively with them.

At the moment we are developing or renewing agreements with the World Health Organisation, UNESCO, the World Intellectual Property Organisation and an affiliate of the Food and Agriculture Organisation. In all cases the agencies and COL complement each other's work well.

We also work on programme matters with the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation. Until recently, except in the area of Human Resources, these relationships have been frustrating and unproductive but I am very pleased to say that following new appointments in the Secretariat and at the Foundation, the future is now looking much brighter.

Who Works for COL?

My last question is simple: who works for COL? I am delighted to say that Professor Dhanarajan bequeathed me an excellent group of colleagues at all levels. I was pleased that last year the Board asked me to develop and implement a Human Resources Framework and Compensation Plan appropriate for an intergovernmental agency. I have carried out that task and we shall discuss that in the Board meeting. In this case I pay tribute to the support we have had from the Human Resources Department at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

It is too early to gauge the long-term effects of the HR Framework, and especially of the new emphasis on rotation of senior staff, but by learning from the experience of other agencies, I am sure that rotation, applied flexibly, can contribute to the dynamism and renewal of the organisation.

Amongst the many pleasures of my job, the greatest is working with such an intelligent, dedicated and productive group of colleagues.

Conclusion and Summary

Many of you are jet-lagged and weary from travel and I have gone on long enough. The good news is that you will not have to listen to presentations tomorrow.

Let me end simply by summarising some of the questions that I have asked in the hope that they may stimulate your discussions at the retreat.

First: what does COL do? What should COL do? Are you content that we should continue to identify policies, systems and applications as key outputs?

Second: which sectors should COL focus on? Are you satisfied with the notion of learning for development in the framework of the Millennium Development Goals? What about the balance of our work between the various goals?

Third: how do you want COL to operate? I have talked about the types of activities that we conduct; about COL's special qualities and about our ways of working. Does all this make sense?

Fourth: I asked for views on where COL should work? Should we continue to be contribution blind in deciding where to work?

Fifth: I talked about who funds COL. How do you, as the Board, propose that we address the unsatisfactory situation of unfulfilled pledges? Are there better ways of raising extrabudgetary funds?

Sixth, I talked about our partnerships with other intergovernmental agencies. Advice on those would be welcome too.

Finally, let me assure you that you have an extraordinary little organisation here. It is made up of excellent and highly skilled people. COL punches well above its weight in advancing the development agenda. It enjoys high credibility with governments and ministers. Its mission is more relevant today than ever. What can we do together, as Board, President and staff, to increase further its impact for good?