Adding global value through
learning for sustainable development

Created by the Commonwealth Heads of Government at CHOGM 1987 in Vancouver, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is the world’s only intergovernmental organisation dedicated exclusively to promoting the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

COL has proven itself to be a leader in learning for sustainable development, and as governments and other stakeholders work towards achieving the United Nations’ new global Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), COL will continue to make a difference in the lives of citizens throughout the Commonwealth and around the world.
COL’s Strategic Plan for 2015-2021, *Learning for Sustainable Development*, is closely aligned with SDG #4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” Developed following wide consultations, it recognises that providing access to learning will not be enough; COL focuses on quality learning that leads to secure livelihoods and economic opportunities, greater harmony among all members of society as global citizens, and protection of the environment.

Through its work, COL achieves local impact on a global scale. COL’s reach is strengthened by its network of stakeholders and partners who ensure that our work is aligned with the needs of the developing world, and work with us to deliver collaborative, innovative programming in two priority sectors: Education and Skills. Through this work, COL develops innovative models and materials that have relevance and impact throughout the Commonwealth and beyond.
Building global capacity for humanitarian response through eLearning

By providing eLearning opportunities for field staff, COL is helping to build capacity for international organisations to respond to humanitarian challenges. COL’s eLearning for International Organisations (eLIO) programme supports the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in building skills among staff members living in conflict zones such as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

Dania Al Yamani, Senior Refugee Status Determination Case Worker in the UNHCR office in Damascus, is one eLearner who went through the course during a difficult situation.

“Since the security situation in my country deteriorated, it has become difficult for me to register and attend courses; eLearning was the solution for easing this problem and keeping the door open for me to gain new experience and knowledge.”

Dania Al Yamani, Senior Refugee Status Determination Case Worker, UNHCR
Supporting post-conflict recovery through mobile learning technology

Low literacy rates present tremendous barriers to traditional forms of learning. To help address this challenge, COL partnered with the University of British Columbia (UBC) to develop Learning through Interactive Voice Educational System, or “LIVES,” a mobile phone-based learning management system that uses audio-based learning.

Working with local organisations, graduate students at the Network and Internet Computing Laboratory at UBC develop learning materials tailored to the needs of communities experiencing low literacy. With support from Partnership-Afghanistan Canada, the students developed a course on child development for Afghan families in and around Kabul. Like parents the world over, Afghan parents want the best for their children, but are challenged by a lack of resources resulting from years of conflict. Through audio lessons delivered over mobile phones in the Dari language, parents learned how to best support their children as they grow and develop.

This approach to learning is showing that technology, when combined with distance learning systems that involve local communities, can play a major role in improving lives in conflict regions and post-conflict societies.

Improving lives in regions with low literacy rates through mobile phone-based audio learning tailored to meet community needs

Photo Credit: Partnership Afghanistan Canada (www.pacafg.org)
Reaching learners through MOOCs for Development

As governments and policymakers seek to expand access to higher education, traditional brick and mortar solutions will not be enough. Demand for higher education, the need for affordable solutions and the growth of accessible online and mobile communications technology have combined to generate the right conditions for MOOCs.

A MOOC (massive open online course) is an online course that normally requires no prior qualifications, can be accessed by anyone who has an Internet connection, and includes a large number of learners. MOOCS allow thousands of learners to participate in the same course with high-quality content and interactive tools for learning providing quality learning opportunities at low cost. When combined with open and distance learning (ODL) methods, MOOCs present unprecedented opportunities in sustainable development.

A recent MOOC on horticulture not only helped gardeners find solutions to their field problems, it also helped students like Niharika Verma, a 21 year old horticulture student from Kanpur, India, to prepare for university exams. Mobiles for Development, which was offered in partnership with the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, and focused on mobile phones as devices to augment sustainable development, attracted 2,282 learners from 116 countries.

By partnering with educational institutions on MOOCs that provide high-quality, accessible learning experiences, COL is reaching thousands of learners throughout the Commonwealth and beyond.

MOOCs provide access to quality learning at a low cost and present unprecedented opportunities in sustainable development.
Influencing a global audience through OER

COL promotes open educational resources (OER) as a cost-effective way to expand access to education materials, and played a significant role in organising the 2012 World OER Congress with UNESCO, which resulted in the Paris OER Declaration.

COL has published various OER guides and resources for practitioners and policymakers and its work in developing and promoting OER facilitates collaboration across borders, both within and beyond the Commonwealth. COL’s own OER have been translated outside of the Commonwealth in China, Ukraine and Germany.

COL maintains a directory to promote OER developed by individuals and institutions from around the world, and continues to partner with UNESCO and other like-minded organisations to raise awareness, develop supportive policies and build capacity so that governments, institutions and individuals are able to effectively harness the potential of OER.
Increasing access to education through a virtual university for small states

Small states represent about two-thirds of the membership of the Commonwealth. While there are significant differences among these countries, they all experience similar challenges in terms of access to quality higher education.

To help address this challenge, the Ministers of Education proposed a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), and COL translated this concept into a reality. VUSSC is not a post-secondary institution, it is a mechanism for small countries to collaboratively develop, adapt and share courses and learning materials and use information and communications technologies (ICT) to broaden access to education.

One particularly unique characteristic of VUSSC is its Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). TQF allows credits to be transferred among institutions and countries, and enables students to move between countries for learning and employment opportunities.

In June 2015, VUSSC celebrated another milestone when the first group of students graduated in Sustainable Agriculture from the National University of Samoa.

“VUSSC has given me the opportunity to follow a diploma programme at the National University of Samoa. I am proud to have a full qualification and a job plus the opportunity to undertake a full degree in Agriculture at the University of the South Pacific.”

Leafaitulagi Vaaelua, a graduate of the VUSSC Diploma in Sustainable Agriculture at the National University of Samoa

VUSSC coupled with TQF are powerful examples of policies that can increase learner access, recognition, transferability and mobility.
Supporting teachers to integrate technology into the classroom

New technologies require teachers to learn new skills as ICT is introduced into classrooms. COL’s Commonwealth Certificate for Teacher Integration (CCTI) programme aims to improve the quality of teaching using ICT as a tool, and teacher leaders are reporting that CCTI is making a difference in their work.

CCTI has been designed as a distance education course and is aligned with the UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers. CCTI resources have been used and repurposed in many countries, within and beyond the Commonwealth, including Kenya, Guyana, Antigua & Barbuda, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, and Indonesia.

“True ICT integration is about students and teachers using technology to share information, present knowledge and demonstrate understanding. CCTI empowered me to differentiate between ICT use and ICT integration in the classroom.”

Jacqueline Y. Peters-Richardson, Education Officer, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Antigua & Barbuda
Enabling virtual learning for primary school students

Tablets and other mobile devices can be great additions to the learning environment; however, in regions where there is limited or no access to the Internet, online devices are of no use. To overcome this obstacle, COL developed Aptus, a low-cost, offline virtual classroom that allows learners to benefit from digital resources and learning networks.

The Ministry of Education in Fiji has started training school teachers in the use of Aptus to strengthen learning in the classroom. The focus is on rural and remote schools, which have limited Internet connectivity. Early feedback is promising with teachers reporting that Aptus helps to engage students and improve performance.

“The capabilities that Aptus had to offer Fiji just blew me away. It was dynamic [and] at the same time user friendly.”

Matai Tagicaki, Education Specialist, Fiji Higher Education Commission

Aptus allows learners with access to mobile phones and tablets to complete lessons and connect with their teachers without access to the Internet or grid power
Transforming teacher education through ICT

With the support of COL, Kenyatta University in Kenya is transforming its education course materials from simple print-based modules to vibrant multi-media content as a way of responding to diverse market demands that require innovative ways of educating.

COL has helped Kenyatta University train teacher educators in multi-media. These trained educators will support other teacher educators to prepare Kenya’s teachers for the future.

“This training has enabled my university to build up a team of educators who will serve as champions in supporting other lecturers in transforming eLearning courses.”

Dr Fatuma Chege, Dean, School of Education, Kenyatta University
Rejuvenating an indigenous community by supporting lifelong learning

The Batwa people of Uganda and Rwanda are some of the world’s poorest people. With no possessions, no land, no means of livelihood, little or no education, a high infant mortality rate and low life expectancy, the Batwa face a bleak future.

To help address these challenges, COL partnered with the Makerere University Agricultural Research Institute Kabanyolo to launch Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) in the Batwa community. The programme aims to strengthen the Batwa’s honey collection and beekeeping enterprise in a sustainable manner.

Using radio programmes and mobile phones, Batwa community members receive audio messages about beekeeping and honey collection, delivered in local dialects and tailored to their learning needs, which they share with others at monthly self-help group meetings.

The Batwa have learned to make all-weather wooden beehives that can produce honey throughout the year. They have also learned about bee forage plants, proper honey harvesting, and acquired business management skills. The learning and self-help group activities have enabled the Batwa community to increase honey collection and strengthen its livelihood security.

Through the L3F activities, the Batwa community has increased honey collection and strengthened its livelihood security.
**Working together to improve lives**

COL works with its partners around the world to provide meaningful and relevant training to improve livelihoods.

Following community consultation and with support from COL’s Technical and Vocational Skills Development programme, Dhaka Ashania Mission (DAM), Bangladesh developed courses in print and video format to provide skills training in poultry farming, nursery, flower cultivation, worm composting and batik printing. Adult learners come to the centre to read and watch the videos. The courses also include information on how to run a business.

This training is making a difference in the lives of citizens like Habibur Rahman, who lives in a rural village in Bangladesh and is a member of the community learning centre set up by DAM. Following the training, Rahman now makes his living producing worm compost and can support his family.
Expanding access to education through open schooling

Traditional classroom settings can present obstacles for people who have left school and may have to juggle work and school if they are to go back and finish their programmes. COL works with Ministers of Education and local organisations to refine the open schooling model in developing nations throughout the Commonwealth, and increase access to quality and relevant education and skills training. This collaborative work is making a difference in the lives of people, especially girls and women like Anna Lorenzo, who may not otherwise be able to complete their primary or secondary education.

“When I decided to finish my secondary education, I was a bit nervous about being back in the classroom. During my first semester they introduced us to an open eLearning platform. At first I was a bit skeptical, but I soon warmed up to the idea and would log on and get my lessons for the day, allowing me to complete my courses and work at the same time.”

Anna Lorenzo, Graduate of Gwen Lizarraga Open School (GLOS), June 2015, Belize City, Belize
Learning for Sustainable Development: Our Common Future

The Commonwealth is a diverse association of nations in various stages of development. Wide disparities exist between countries and within regions. With its 2015-2021 Strategic Plan, COL has made a transition from “Learning for Development” to “Learning for Sustainable Development” to align with the United Nations’ post-2015 global Sustainable Development Goals. The plan was developed following consultations in each region of the Commonwealth to ensure that COL’s work supports community and national priorities, and remains relevant and responsive to the needs of its different stakeholders.

Education and skills development play a critical role in achieving sustainable development. Learning can empower citizens to take greater responsibility for their own well-being as well as that of their societies and environment. Through its work, COL is building on its strengths and leadership in open learning and distance education, and working with global and national partners to transform the idea of sustainable development into a concrete and actionable reality.
The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to promote the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

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