

Promoting Learning for Sustainable Development



2 October 2017

Presented at the 34th Diplomats Induction Programme
London, UK

Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

I thank our sister organisations the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation, in particular my friends, Nabeel and Vijay for the opportunity to brief with you about who the Commonwealth of Learning is and what it does.

We are based in Metro Vancouver and not in London—why?

Canada hosted two Summits in 1987—for the Commonwealth and the Francophonie.

COL is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government at the 1987 CHOGM. Canada came forward to host the organisation and we've been in beautiful British Columbia since.

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed at the time, amended in 1995 and then 2014.

COL has a Headquarters Agreement with Canada and enjoys the immunities and privileges under the Foreign Missions and International Organisations Act of Canada. COL also follows the income tax regulations of Canada.

We are supported through voluntary contributions from Member States and the number of countries contributing to COL's budget has doubled since 2006. There are seven major donors—Canada, UK, India, Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria and South Africa—each of whom has a seat on our board of governors.

COL has a small international board with a Chair, the Commonwealth Secretary General, the seven major donors, one representative each from the Pacific, Asia, Africa and the Caribbean and the SG of the ACU as an Advisor.

While our headquarters are in Canada, we have a regional office the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in New Delhi.

The activities are focused on the eight Member States in the region.

We have also established regional centres in different parts of our diverse Commonwealth—RETRIDOL for West Africa hosted by the National Open University of Nigeria.

The SADC-CDE for the SADC sub-region and located at the Botswana College of Open and Distance Learning.

The Pacific Centre for Open Learning for Development is hosted by the University of the South Pacific in Suva.

The Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning was established at the Ministry of Education and Employment during the 2015 CHOGM in Malta. These Centres help COL to build regional capacity and maintain a presence in the field.

We also have a network of Focal Points in each country, nominated by Ministers of Education, who are a valuable resource for shaping our strategic direction.

As per the MOU, COL is required to report to Education Ministers at their triennial meetings and to Foreign Ministers at CHOGMs. We also report to the COMSEC board and our own board and its audit and executive committees.

We present reports of our work in each country to Ministers of Education. We circulated a report of what we have done in your countries during 2012-15 at the 19th CCEM held in the Bahamas and the next triennial report will be presented to Ministers at the 20th CCEM in Fiji. We have prepared some highlights of our work for the financial year 2016-17.

What do we do? Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to quality education and training.

We have developed a Strategic Plan 2015-21 after wide consultations around the Commonwealth entitled 'learning for sustainable development'.

This aligns us with Sustainable Development Goal 4 which aspires to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to three things: one, economic growth, two, social inclusion and three, environmental conservation.

First, how has COL supported economic growth? Let me share three examples

These women in India are part of COL's L3F project, under which they have learnt agriculture and enterprise development skills using basic mobile phones. They have established companies in agriculture and livestock in which they are shareholders and have generated enough assets within a space of three years to pay back their loans and support themselves and their families.

In Kenya, COL supported women to start agri-enterprises and a recent study concludes that learning leads to empowerment and for every 1% increase in empowerment, there is a 2.3% increase in profits.

COL has been working with Kofirudua Polytechnic in Ghana and the artisans trained have started their own enterprises and indicate an 80% improvement in their standard of living.

Two, how does COL's work support social inclusion? The first cohort of out of school youth in a remote fishing village in Trinidad & Tobago graduated through a COL-supported open school. The entire curriculum was structured around fisheries which addressed the livelihoods needs of the young people.

COL worked with a partner in a remote rural community in Samoa to train people and a study shows that this has not only enhanced their knowledge and skills but also led to increased income and food security.

These young students go to a COL-supported open school in Belize. Research shows that every \$ invested has resulted in \$ 8 worth of benefits to students.

Third, what is COL's contribution to environmental conservation?

Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). All 30 small states of the Commonwealth are active members of this consortium. Environmental sustainability is a central concern for all the small states. VUSSC is offering online courses in eco-tourism, sustainable fisheries and sustainable agriculture. A recent study conducted in Botswana showed that the carbon footprint of a VUSSC distance learning student was only one tenth of that of a campus-based student, without a negative impact on learning outcomes.

Working with the Blue Economy Institute in Seychelles, COL has developed a course on this emerging field and this was offered as a free MOOC by the University of Seychelles in June this year.

COL is working with the National Teachers Institute, Nigeria, which has an annual enrolment of 50,000 trainee teachers, to develop a Green Teacher course which will ensure that teachers inculcate environmental concerns amongst school children from an early stage.

Let me also share three significant events that mark this year.

You'll be pleased to note that we received an A++ rating from DFID which means we've substantially exceeded expectations in outputs and outcomes. The results achieved for this year are: over 370000 learners have been reached, with more than 50% being women. 102 institutions around the Commonwealth have adopted COL models and materials and we supported the development of 635 curricula and learning resources. How were we able to do this? By working with 280 partners in 42 countries.

COL triennial Pan Commonwealth Forum was organized in partnership with the Open University of Malaysia, and attracted over 500 participants from 60 countries, including seven ministers of education. This resulted in the 2016 KL Declaration which provides a clear roadmap of how distance and technology-based learning can lead to sustainable development.

Gender underpins all our work at COL and we signed an MOU with the Executive Director of UN Women to collaborate on gender equality in education and skills development for women and girls.

These, in short, are a few examples of our work. COL is your organisation and it works for you. It is small and flexible and can respond readily to your needs. COL is a source of world class expertise in open distance and technology based approaches, develops innovative models and quality resources and supports capacity building. Please encourage your countries to make full use of these.

With that let me thank you for your contributions.