Opening Remarks

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COL Focal Points Meeting – Pacific Region
Nadi, Fiji

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Deputy Vice Chancellor, USP; Distinguished Focal Points and Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure to be here in Nadi for the Pacific Focal Points meeting. We are very grateful to Dr Hasmukh Lal, Director and Matai Tagicaki of the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD), for their support in co-hosting this regional event. Thanks to each and every one of you for coming to this meeting. I am pleased to note that we have 8 FPs or their representatives from the 11 Member States.

Fiji is a very important member of the Commonwealth and is hosting the 20th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers next week, where we will see the who’s who of education from around the world. The theme of this conference ‘Sustainability and Resilience: can education deliver?’ is of great relevance today in our complex and uncertain world, but especially so for the small states.

As we are at the mid-point of our Strategic Plan ‘learning for sustainable development’, we will be holding regional meetings around the Commonwealth. This is the first meeting in the series planned for this year and we decided to use our presence at the 20th CCEM to convene our Pacific Focal Points. These Focal Points meetings are very important events in the life of COL, which is why you see three of us here. This is usually not possible as we have only a small group of specialists. We have taken this opportunity to organize other meetings as well. One of these is a roundtable on Open Educational Resources that we are organizing jointly with USP at the Integrated People’s Forum being held just before the Ministerial meetings. Fiji and USP have taken a leadership role by developing a national and institutional policies on OER, an experience that can be shared with other Commonwealth countries and institutions just beginning to enter this space.

Recognising that the Commonwealth is a diverse and geographically dispersed community, COL has established regional centers to support capacity building in the field. We are very grateful to Prof Rajesh Chandra for hosting PACFOLD at the USP campus in Suva. PACFOLD was established as a regional hub of expertise in flexible and open approaches to learning and is there to strengthen existing institutions through capacity development designed to meet their specific needs. Please take full advantage of this facility.

In the past, most countries in the region have participated in pan-Pacific activities. All the Commonwealth small states in the Pacific are members of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth or VUSSC. One important milestone for the VUSSC and the National University of Samoa partnership was the graduation of the first group of students who earned their Diplomas in Sustainable Agriculture. Solomon Islands National University is offering VUSSC courses. In the last three years, COL has sponsored 45 persons from Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu, to do the COL-developed Legislative Drafting course offered by USP. The Pacific was well
represented at the 8th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in Malaysia. COL has also supported a number of conferences and forums, including the Pacific TVET Open, Distance and Flexible Learning Forum in Tonga, a Pacific TVET OER Workshop in Fiji which saw participants from nine countries. But we didn’t think this was enough.

COL has been making special efforts to deepen its work in your countries and this targeted approach is beginning to deliver results.

In Fiji, COL has worked with the USP to develop an OER policy and organized several regional training programmes in OER and TVET.

COL is working with Kiribati Teachers’ College & Ministry of Education to develop a school-based teacher development programme and organized an eFacilitation online training for KTC staff.

Colleagues from Nauru participated in a regional OER for TVET workshop in Fiji.

COL awarded scholarships to five teachers from the University of Papua New Guinea to complete the Certificate in Designing and Facilitating eLearning at The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. COL also provided support to Ginigoada an NGO on instructional design resulting in the development of a book keeping course in PNG.

In Samoa, COL developed a Technology Enabled Learning Policy and Strategy with the National University of Samoa. COL’s work with the Matuailaleo Environment Trust Inc. to strengthen the training of community development workers in Life Skills and Permaculture has resulted in increased income and food security.

COL is working with Solomon Islands National University (SINU) to develop a distance learning Diploma in Construction Management. COL has been invited by SINU to develop a ‘second chance education programme’, for 4000 learners a top priority for the prime minister himself.

In Tonga, COL has partnered with the Ministry of Education and Training, the Tonga Institute of Education and the Tonga Institute of Higher Education to develop OER based eLearning courses on life skills. The Tonga Business Enterprise Center, an institution of Tonga Chambers of Commerce and Industry, launched a financial literacy programme for farming communities, particularly women, with the support of COL.

In Tuvalu, COL facilitated a workshop in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Island Council which brought together participants from five islands. Additionally, pilot courses for technical and vocational skills such as working with concrete, basic horticulture, introduction to basic painting skills, and basic sewing skills, were developed.

In Vanuatu, COL is supporting the Ministry of Education and Training to adapt an OER course in small engine maintenance and assisting with the process of registration of the course as an accredited programme in the newly reformed competency-based education and training system. COL’s support in Vanuatu has a special focus on providing secondary schooling for out-of-school youth by improving throughput and reducing dropout rates. COL has facilitated a twinning arrangement with the Open Access College, Australia.

These examples give you a flavor of COL’s partners and their activities. I hope this meeting will further strengthen our engagement in the region.

What do we hope to achieve at this meeting? Let me outline four key objectives.
One, we need to hear from you what your priorities are and how these will fit in with COL’s mission and mandate. We will be listening very carefully as you outline the key areas that COL should integrate into its plan so that we are able to address these systematically as we go forward. We have strengthened our work in the Pacific but we need to do more and this can’t happen without your help.

Two, this is also an opportunity for us to present a summary of what we have done thus far in each of your countries. You will recall that the current Six Year Plan started on July 1, 2015 and takes us to June 2021—we are now at the mid-point and would like to give you an interim report. The final report will be presented at the next Focal Points meeting.

Three, these face-to-face meetings are an excellent forum to remind you of COL’s purpose, its organization and its programmes. While some of you may be veteran Focal Points, others may be quite new to COL and its work. Since you are our ambassadors in the field, it is important that you know what we do.

Four, as a Commonwealth organization, it is part of our mission to promote Commonwealth-wide cooperation. The Commonwealth is often referred to as a family of nations that works through consensus, respect and understanding. These meetings serve to remind us of our shared values and our common identity as citizens of the Commonwealth. In fact, the theme for the CHOGM to be held in London in April is ‘Towards our Common Future’.

In addition, these meetings allow us to introduce our staff to you. Just as some of you are new, we too have a policy of rotation under which old staff members leave making way for new colleagues from other Commonwealth countries. Let me then introduce you to our Vice President Dr Bala—some of you may have met him in Auckland at the Regional Consultation on OER; and Dr Alison Mead Richardson, our ES; Skills Development, who has been very active in the region.

Let me thank you all once again for your presence and for being COL’s voice and visibility in the field. Let me once again thank Prof Rajesh Chandra and his team for being such staunch supporters and friends of COL. Let me extend a warm welcome to each one of you.