

COL in the Commonwealth: Promoting Learning for Sustainable Development



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COL Report to Ministers
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Chair, Honourable Ministers, it is an honour to present my organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning or COL to you as it completes 30 years of service to the Commonwealth this year.

It is a privilege to be here with the Chair of the COL Board of Governors, Dr Linda Sissons CNZM. We are very fortunate to have a Chair who brings to her role a wealth of experience and expertise in both education and skills.

As you know, COL is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver for CHOGM 1987.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to education and training.

How well are we succeeding in this objective? We have prepared an account of our work entitled COL in the Commonwealth: Country Reports 2015-18. The complete compendium of what COL has done in each Member State is a substantial document and is available on the USB which we have provided. This also contains a library of resources that you will find useful. We have only given you printed copies of reports relating to your country. I hope you are pleased with the results.

As Ministers of Education, you face four challenges: first, you want to increase access to education and training for human resource development. Second, you want to improve the quality of education. Third, you want to include the excluded and reach the unreached. Fourth, you want to achieve all this at the lowest costs possible.

All these challenges can be addressed by harnessing the potential of existing and new technologies. COL's role is help you make full use of this potential.

After wide consultations across the Commonwealth, we developed our Strategic Plan 2015-2021, entitled 'Learning for Sustainable Development'

This aligns closely with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 which aspires to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

In order to cover the spectrum of lifelong learning, which includes formal, non-formal; and informal learning, we have organised our work in two sectors—education and skills with gender as a crosscutting theme.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. Let me demonstrate this with some examples of our work.

First, how has COL supported economic growth? COL's Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme is offered by universities in 11 countries. This high quality distance learning programme enrolled over 30,000 learners, of whom 14,000 have already graduated.

A recent study conducted at the Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan indicates that the graduates of this programme saw an increase of 38% in their monthly income, increased their chances of promotion by over 28% and every \$ invested resulted in \$3.40 direct returns for the learners.

Raymond Loh, an alumnus of Wawasan Open University, Malaysia completed this programme in his early fifties and started a moving and relocation service which now has a presence in 40 countries.

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. Small states develop needs-based courses collaboratively that are available as Open Educational Resources or OER not just to the members but to anyone anywhere in the world. 23 institutions in 14 countries are offering these courses.

As a result, tuition fees for the VUSSC students has been reduced by 69% as compared to students at a campus institution in Botswana. The majority of VUSSC learners combine work and study and by saving the opportunity costs are able to get more benefits than campus students in any one year.

Leafaitulagi Vaelua is a graduate of the VUSSC diploma in sustainable agriculture from the National University of Samoa and is already in full-time employment.

Non-formal learning is equally important. 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. Every dollar invested has generated assets worth \$9.

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.

Two, how does COL's work support social inclusion? As countries achieve success in providing universal primary education, there are still significant barriers preventing many young people from entering secondary education. Open schools can provide flexible learning opportunities through the use of open and distance learning. These young students go to a COL-supported open school in Belize. Research shows that every \$ invested has resulted in \$ 8 worth of perceived benefits to students.

Another COL study shows that open schooling costs well below formal secondary schools. The National Institute of Open Schooling, India costs one tenth and the Namibian College of Open Learning costs one fifth of what it costs to put a student through a government secondary school. It is for this reason that 27 Commonwealth countries have established open schools.

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.

We know that not everyone in the Commonwealth has internet connectivity. The Commonwealth average for internet use is only 30%. To overcome this, COL developed Aptus a low-cost offline virtual classroom that provides learners in remote locations with access to digital resources. Aptus been deployed with effective outcomes in Pakistan, Kiribati, Samoa and Vanuatu and could be a useful tool for you to reach the last mile.

Third, what is COL's contribution to environmental conservation? Environmental sustainability is a central concern for everyone, particularly the small states. A recent study conducted in Botswana showed that the carbon footprint of a VUSSC distance learning student was only one third of that of their campus-based counterparts.

Working with the Blue Economy Institute in Seychelles, COL supported the development of an online course in this emerging field which was offered free by the University of Seychelles last year. It attracted 247 learners from 24 countries worldwide.

In partnership with the University of the South Pacific, UNESCO and JICA, COL supported a massive open online course on Climate Change, which had 70% registrants from the Pacific region. COL has developed MOOKit an open source MOOC platform in partnership with the IITK which is available free to any institution in Member States. Please make use of this effective tool for skilling at scale for a fraction of the costs.

COL is working with the National Teachers Institute, Nigeria, 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 highlights from our work since the previous CCEM.

COL triennial Pan Commonwealth Forum was organized in partnership with the Open University of Malaysia, and attracted over 500 participants from 60 countries, including several Commonwealth 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.

COL is an acknowledged world leader in open educational resources and organized six regional consultations worldwide in collaboration with UNESCO, the government of Slovenia and Hewlett Foundation leading to 2nd World OER Congress held in Ljubljana last September, where several Commonwealth ministers were present.

Even today we find a wide prevalence of early child and forced marriage across the Commonwealth. COL is training girls and women in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania for employment and entrepreneurship.

In the last two years, more than 34,000 girls have been trained, over 7000 have new sources of income and nearly 500 child marriages have been averted. A recent study found that as a result of this training, the probability of being employed had increased by 50% and the income increased fivefold.

You'll be pleased to note that for 2015-16, we received an A++ rating from DFID for substantially exceeding expectations in outputs and outcomes. Over the past two years more than 370,000 learners have been reached, 50% being women. Over 110 institutions around the Commonwealth have adopted COL models and materials and we supported the development of over 2200 curricula and learning resources. How was this possible? By working with 280 partners in 42 countries and harnessing appropriate technologies.

These, Honourable Ministers, are a few examples of how learning leads to sustainable development. COL is your organisation and it works for you. Even at thirty, COL remains 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, quality resources and supports capacity building. I invite you to make full use of these facilities.

Let me conclude by thanking you for nominating Focal Points who are our direct link to your ministry and are a valuable resource for shaping our agenda.

More than three fourths of Commonwealth countries make voluntary contributions to COL's budget. We consider this an important indicator of your confidence in us. Thank you for your contributions, both financial and intellectual, and for your kind attention.