

Our Common Future



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Chair, Hon Ministers, Excellencies

The Commonwealth of Learning was created as an intergovernmental organisation thirty years ago at the CHOGM held in Vancouver. COL's mission is to help Member States and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to education and training.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. I have given a full report on how we achieve this on Wednesday.

For COL, the ultimate stakeholder is the out-of-school youth in a remote village in Trinidad & Tobago; the indigenous bee-keeper in the forests of Uganda; the woman goat herder in a remote village in India; the teacher in a rural school in Samoa.

In order to equip these constituencies for learning and livelihoods, we need innovative approaches to change the existing paradigms. Let me share six important shifts that COL is leading.

The first shift: technology enabled learning can break open the ivory towers of tertiary education. Open and distance learning can reach the unreached, cost one third as compared to campus education, without compromising quality. More than 31 Commonwealth countries and 110 institutions are opening access to millions of learners through distance learning.

The second shift: if the child cannot go to school, the school can come to the child. Open schools provide flexible learning opportunities for secondary education. The Namibian College of Open Learning costs one fifth of what it costs to put a student through a government secondary school and attracts 65% girls because of flexibility and low costs. It is for this reason that 27 Commonwealth countries have established open schools.

The third shift: Open Educational Resources are the answer to closed and costly textbooks. OER are free educational materials which anyone can adopt or adapt without having to seek the author's permission. A poor widowed woman in Kenya, with four children told us that the worst feeling a mother could get next to hunger was the inability to buy a textbook for her child. OER based textbooks reduce costs while at the same time enhancing quality. In Antigua & Barbuda a student saves ECD 750 per year in buying textbooks and learning outcomes improved by 5.5% through the use OER. All COL resources are OER and have been translated into French, German, Spanish, Arabic and Chinese, among others. COL has helped 9 countries to develop OER policies, including Nigeria with an impact on tens of thousands of students.

The fourth shift: the digital divide can be transformed into a digital dividend. Not everyone in the Commonwealth has computers and connectivity. COL developed Aptus a low-cost offline virtual classroom that provides learners in remote locations with access to digital resources. It's a server that works with a solar charger and a wireless router and costs \$ 150. Last week Aptus devices and tablets were presented to the Minister of Education Tonga for restoring the classes affected by Cyclone Gita. Aptus in Pakistan and Samoa resulted in better motivation of teachers and improved learning outcomes. Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs have been tailored to suit the needs of developing countries and so far over 150000 learners have been reached even through basic mobile phones.

The fifth shift: literacy is not a precondition for learning. Through mobile learning, the Batwa community in the forests of Uganda learned scientific honey and beekeeping practices which has resulted in two meals a day and schools for their children. In India, women entrepreneurs at the bottom of the pyramid established a farm producers company with COL support. These illiterate women learnt corporate finance through their basic mobile phones. In the past two years 137,000 women in 11 countries have been lifted out of poverty and every dollar invested has resulted in assets worth 9 dollars.

The sixth shift: the social capital of the mother is the most important determinant in bringing girls to school. In order to skill 35000 girls, over 200000 family and community members had to be sensitized. Empowered mothers and sensitized communities can be the most powerful stakeholders for ensuring that each girl completes 12 years of school.

Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, these six shifts will help shape our common future. COL will continue to remain responsive and relevant to your needs.

More than four fifths of the Commonwealth Member States make voluntary contributions to COL's budget. We consider this an important indicator of your confidence. We warmly welcome Fiji as our newest member. Thank you for your contributions, both financial and intellectual, and for your kind attention.