

Speech at COL's 30th Anniversary Reception



13 June 2018

Metropolitan Hotel Vancouver, Canada

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Honourable Chair, Members of the Board of Governors, Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for joining us today as we celebrate our 30th anniversary. Thirty years ago, the Commonwealth Heads of Government met here in Vancouver and decided to establish an organisation that would use distance learning and technologies to promote education and training in Member States. Today, we can say that COL has fulfilled that vision. We work in 47 countries, have reached millions of learners and made a difference to the livelihoods of thousands of families.

COL is what it is today because of the tireless efforts of the many from around the Commonwealth. Our staff represent fifteen different nationalities. If COL is respected today, it is due largely to the outstanding guidance of its distinguished Board, the valuable legacy of its former Presidents and the dedication and commitment of its staff—a group of world class professionals.

In his message on the occasion, the former Chair of our Board of Governors, the Hon Burchell Whiteman writes: *'COL has earned international respect because of ...its ability to remain relevant to its clients in a changed and changing environment.'*

COL started out with higher education and has now expanded its work to include non-formal learning as well. In fact, COL covers the entire spectrum of lifelong learning, the global aspiration of SDG 4.

Our former President, Tan Sri Raj Dhanarajan, believes that *'COL has every reason to take pride in...the values it has added to the educational strategies and plans of fifty-three nations.'*

COL believes strongly in the values of equity and inclusion. COL has trained thousands of marginalised girls in skills for livelihoods in five countries. Atia lives in a remote region in Bangladesh. Married at the age of 12, she is 22 now and has two children. She learnt sewing machine operation with COL support and borrowed money from her father to buy a sewing machine. Today, she earns enough and has repaid the loan and enrolled her son in school.

My immediate predecessor, Sir John Daniel, identifies another element of COL's success: *'COL operates at the grassroots and makes local institutions and individuals the primary agents of its work'*.

COL's lifelong learning for farmers is an excellent example of our work at the grassroots level. In India, illiterate women established a farm producers company with COL support. Many of these women learnt corporate finance through their basic mobile phones. Valarmathi, who had never seen a computer is now a business correspondent for a bank, operating accounts through computers.

Former Vice Chancellor of the Open University, UK, Professor Brenda Gourley, believes '*COL is an exemplar of what a small organisation can do to further its noble cause when it harnesses technology, uses traditional means where appropriate. ... and does all this with imagination, ingenuity, and visionary leadership.*'

When Cyclone Gita blew away the roofs of schools and inundated classrooms in Tonga earlier this year, the Minister of Education turned to COL for support. COL has developed a low-cost device called Aptus, which provides digital resources even when there is no electricity. Thousands of high quality secondary school materials were loaded on Aptus devices and despatched to Tonga in record time so that children could resume classes without delay.

I hope these examples of COL's work and impressions of some eminent personalities give you an idea of what we do. It is a challenge to reach our stakeholders dispersed around the Commonwealth. But challenges are what make COL's work interesting and overcoming them is what makes this work meaningful. We are thankful for your support over the last thirty years and I hope we can count on it for the next three decades as well. Once again, thank you for coming.