

# Opening Remarks

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Asia Focal Points Meeting  
New Delhi, India

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Distinguished Focal Points, Colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Asian Focal Points meeting. This is the final in the series of four regional meetings that we organised this year. 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 are very grateful to Dr Shahid Rasool, director of our regional office CEMCA and his team for their support. Thanks to each and every one of you for travelling long distances to be here. We have a small group of Asian Focal Points and representatives from Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, which makes this a truly Commonwealth event.

India is a very important member of the Commonwealth and over the years has been a consistent supporter of COL, both financially and intellectually. The Secretary Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development is a member of our international Board of Governors.

As you know COL was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987 to help Member States, institutions and organisations to expand the scale, efficiency and quality of learning through the use of various technologies. Over the 30 years of service to the Commonwealth, we have constantly renewed ourselves to remain relevant to your needs.

Today most governments are accelerating efforts to achieve SDG 4 which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. We need more trained teachers as only 77% primary teachers in Southern Asia are trained which is lower than the global average. We need 12 years of free and compulsory education—only 11% countries in Southern Asia offer this as of now--how can other countries make and meet this commitment? In spite of the high demand for tertiary education the gross enrolment ratio still stands at about 25%, which is less than the world average. If we need to increase the number of qualified teachers, have more children complete 12 years of schooling and increase the GER in tertiary education, we need innovative approaches and that is where COL has a role.

Let me share some examples of COL's work.

COL's Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme uses a blended approach, to open up access to quality executive education at a fraction of the cost. This is offered by institutions in eleven countries including Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers is a holistic model, which links farmers to learning and financial institutions and has lifted hundreds of thousands of farmers out of poverty in 11 countries. A Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on Introduction to Technology-Enabled Learning offered with Athabasca University in Canada has concluded in November and you'll be pleased to know that the highest registrations came from Fiji, followed by India and Bangladesh. COL's open school is a flexible model, that increases access to

secondary education and is being implemented in several Commonwealth countries with new initiatives under way in Nigeria and Trinidad & Tobago.

In addition to these pan-Commonwealth initiatives, COL has been making special efforts to deepen its work in each of your countries and this targeted approach is beginning to deliver results. In our host country India, the primary focus is to support the open and distance learning systems to enhance quality by harnessing the potential of new technologies, new pedagogies and new approaches. COL's MOOC on Life Skills for Engineers was offered on mooKIT, a platform developed with IIT-K and generated blockchain certificates of completion. MooKIT has been used by institutions in Canada, Fiji and Nigeria. COL supported a partnership between the Centre for Environmental Education, India and NTI, Nigeria to launch the Green Teacher programme which aims to help teachers inculcate environmental concerns among children from the early stages. Another recent example of our work is with State Resource Centre, Kerala (SRCK) where Preraks/functionaries of Kerala State Literacy Mission were trained to work effectively in the field. As a result, a 96 year old woman Mrs. Karthyayini completed her literacy test with distinction.

In Bangladesh, COL worked with the Access2Information in the PM's office and BOU to develop a draft OER policy which has been presented to the Ministry of Education. The Hon Minister of Education represents Asia on the COL Board of Governors. COL is working with partners such as Dhaka Ahsania Mission, the Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES) and Sidhulai Swarnivar Sangstha to train young people especially girls in skills for livelihoods. Atia, a 22 year old woman who was married at the age of 12 lives in a remote region in Bangladesh. Because of the training in sewing and sewing machine operation, supported by COL, she now earns 9,000 Bangladeshi Taka per month, and her son attends school. Since Atia earns an income, she has more agency and respect within her household.

Malaysian institutions such as Wawasan Open University and Asia eUniversity have been working with COL to provide leadership training for VCs and senior women academics of Commonwealth higher education institutions. COL has helped the Universiti Malaysia Sabah to implement technology-enabled learning. The Open University of Malaysia have developed OER courses on Principles of Design and Digital Imaging as part of a consortium of six institutions in India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Tanzania.

AIOU, Pakistan as a member of this consortium has contributed by developing courses on web development and web programming. COL was part of the consultations on the development of a national policy on ODL organised by AIOU and provided an implementation map to HEC after the completion of the policy. COL is also working with partners SPARC and Bedari to train girls in skills for livelihoods.

In Sri Lanka, COL has been working with the Ministry of Education for teacher training and OER policy. Quality assurance and gender mainstreaming in universities are other important activities in the country and key partners include the OUSL, Universities of Ruhuna, Jaffna and Peradeniya. The OUSL is implementing the COL Commonwealth Digital Education Leadership for teachers and students in 39 schools across the nine provinces of the country.

These are some examples of COL's partners and our work, which covers formal, non-formal and informal learning. We need your advice on what we can do to support your priorities.

At the first meeting, held in Fiji in February, the Pacific Focal Points highlighted the need for capacity building in technology enabled learning and OER. TVET, skills and programmes to address gender-based

violence and promote indigenous education were a priority for the region. Migration with dignity was a key concern.

The Caribbean meeting was held in August in Jamaica. Teacher education and open textbooks, competency-based models for skills development and climate smart curriculum for agricultural extension officers and empowering boys were identified as regional priorities. In light of the impact of climate change on the small islands, education and resilience was identified as a major theme.

The African Focal Points meeting, organized in September in Botswana, focused on tertiary education and the importance of quality assurance. New areas that emerged, were curriculum reform and mobile-based platforms for learning and information sharing. Because of its young population with a median age of 19, youth development on the continent is an important issue.

Despite the diversity of the regions, common concerns were capacity building, policy and content development and support for monitoring and evaluation. Harnessing the potential of technologies and innovation is of interest in all regions.

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 can be addressed by COL.

Two, this is also an opportunity for us to present a summary of what we have done in your countries since 2015 and we have given you an interim report. The final report will be presented to Ministers of Education at the 21st CCEM in Kenya.

Three, these face-to-face meetings are an excellent forum to remind you of COL's purpose, its organisation and its programmes. Since you are our ambassadors in the field, it is important that you know what we do.

Four, as a Commonwealth organisation, 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 addition, these meetings allow us to introduce our staff. We 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—Dr Sanjaya Mishra who leads our work in Technology-Enabled Learning and Dr Shahid Rasool, director, CEMCA.

Let me thank you all once again for your presence and for being COL's voice and visibility in the field. Once again a warm welcome to each one of you.