

Achieving SDG 4: are ICTs the answer?



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Chairperson, Hon Ministers, Colleagues,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the topic ‘Achieving SDG4: are ICTs the answer?’ from the perspective of my organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning.

As you know, COL was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver for CHOGM in 1987. Ever since, we have been in beautiful British Columbia, which makes us the only Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation not in London.

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

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

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.

Our strategy is to harness the potential of existing and new technologies to achieve development outcomes.

But if we are to achieve SDG4 by 2030, we need to move beyond the ‘business as usual’ approach and the ‘brick and mortar’ mindset which assumes that learning is only possible within the walls of a classroom. We will need alternative and innovative approaches to address the magnitude of the challenge. Are we ready to make the paradigm shifts required to fast track progress towards SDG4?

Let me share with you the six shifts that COL has led.

The first shift: if the child cannot go to school, the school comes to the child.

Open schools provide flexible learning opportunities for secondary education. The learner is separated from the teacher and the distance is bridged through appropriate technologies including radio, TV, the internet. ICTs and innovative approaches are making it possible to reach dispersed constituencies of learners at scale.

In India, the National Institute of Open Schooling has a cumulative enrolment of 2.7 million students, 31% being female. The Bangladesh Open School enrolled 165,000 students, 40% of whom are female. In a smaller country such as Namibia, over 80,000 students, 65% being female enrolled at the Namibia College of Open Learning. The issue of access and equity in secondary education can be addressed by establishing open schools.

What of costs? A COL study found that in India, an open school costs one tenth of what it costs to put a student through a secondary school. Similarly in Namibia, students who go to NAMCOL pay one fifth compared to their counterparts in government secondary schools. It is for this reason that 27 Commonwealth countries have established open schools.

The second shift: technology enabled learning can break open the ivory towers of tertiary education.

There is a huge demand for higher education. As governments and policy makers sought to expand access to higher education, they realized that traditional brick and mortar solutions would not be enough. They began to invest in open universities. There has been a huge growth of open universities in the developing Commonwealth with 31 open universities opening up access to millions of learners. There has been a record growth in Asia and we'll see the next wave in Africa. Botswana Open University was inaugurated last September.

A study by the National Knowledge Commission, India, shows that mega-universities, which achieve economies of scale cost substantially less than campus institutions. Pakistan's AIOU costs 22%; China 40%; India's IGNOU 35% and the OUUK, 50% as compared to campus universities.

What of quality? Studies show that there is no significant difference between distance learning and campus education. In fact in 2012, the Open University, UK ranked 5th in student satisfaction among all UK universities and was one place ahead of Oxford which ranked sixth.

The third shift: Open Educational Resources are the answer to closed and costly textbooks.

Affordability and costs are a key barrier to access in tertiary education. In a COL survey conducted in Malaysia, 76% university students decided not to buy a textbook because it was too expensive. Similarly, 73% students in Bangladesh depended on photocopied materials as textbooks were too costly.

OER based textbooks reduce costs while at the same time enhancing quality. In Antigua & Barbuda a student saved ECD 750 per year in buying textbooks and learning outcomes improved by 5.5% through the use of OER.

COL has helped 9 countries, including Malta and Sri Lanka to develop OER policies. COL supported the National Universities Commission, Nigeria to develop an OER policy as a result of which 165 universities are now involved in the development and sharing of OER 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. Children studying under a tree is not an uncommon sight. Can these children become part of global knowledge flows?

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

approximately \$ 150. A colleague from the Higher Education Commission, Fiji found this both ‘dynamic and user-friendly’.

Following the devastation wreaked by cyclone Gita, COL responded by sending secondary school materials to Tonga on Aplus. My colleague who went to train the technical staff in Tonga is presenting the device and tablets to the minister of education. Aplus been deployed with effective outcomes in Kiribati, Samoa and Vanuatu.

The fifth shift: literacy is not always a precondition for learning.

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. Jamaica through the HEART Trust is a key partner.

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.

The sixth shift: the social capital of the mother is the most important determinant in bringing girls to school.

During CHOGM 2018, the British government announced an initiative to leave no girl behind and ensure that every girl has access to 12 years of quality education. How will this be possible?

With support from the governments of Australia and Canada, COL is schooling and skilling girls and women in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania for employment and entrepreneurship. Community engagement was one of our main strategies. The members of the family must be empowered—this was done through self-growth sessions and advocacy meetings for mothers.

Fatima, a 14-year-old girl in Mozambique, was to be married to her father’s colleague. During the door to door visits conducted by our partner, the community facilitator asked Fatima why she was not in school and sought the support of the community leader. Initially, the father was reluctant to listen, but he agreed to put a stop to the marriage. Since then, Fatima has returned to school.

Samina in Pakistan recounts how she was forced to labour with her parents rather than go to school but now with community advocacy she is empowered to send her daughter to school. Empowered mothers and sensitised communities can be the most powerful stakeholders for ensuring that each girl completes 12 years of school

In conclusion let us go back to the question we started with—are ICTs the answer to achieving SDG 4?

The COL experience shows that ICTs by itself will not help us achieve SDG 4 but must be placed in an appropriate social political and economic context.

You have seen how COL has steered six paradigm shifts. All these shifts were possible by harnessing the potential of technology not just for formal education but also for lifelong learning. COL integrates conventional pedagogy with self-directed learning or heutagogy. Community involvement and innovative models are key to the success of these initiatives.

With that let me thank you for your kind attention and your valuable contributions, both financial and intellectual.