

Speech at Canada House Reception for the Ninth Pan-Commonwealth Forum



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Deputy HC of Canada, SG of the Commonwealth, Chancellor of the OU, Lords, Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests

What a pleasure to be here in Canada House, a microcosm of the beautiful country that hosts the Commonwealth of Learning. We are very grateful to the High Commission for hosting us this evening and to the Government of Canada for hosting us for over 30 years, making us the only Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation, not in London.

Let me pay a special tribute to Sarah Fountain Smith for her unwavering confidence and support. Thanks to her personal efforts, COL received a grant from Canada to train girls for livelihoods in Bangladesh, Mozambique, Pakistan, and Tanzania. As a result, over 23000 girls were trained and 1181 child early and forced marriages were averted in the last three years.

We are very grateful to our Secretary General Baroness Scotland for being with us tonight. Under her leadership, a productive partnership between COMSEC, ACU and COL is in place to address youth development and climate change. These themes will also be taken up at the ninth Pan Commonwealth Forum.

The PCF is a moving feast that passes through all regions of the Commonwealth. This time we are going to Edinburgh with our partner the Open University UK. The OU has shaped the development of open universities in both Asia and Africa and is a symbol of quality and innovation across the Commonwealth. It's a privilege to organise this important Forum with you.

Commonwealth Heads of Government established COL to help member states use distance learning and technologies in expanding access to education and training. Over the years, COL has constantly reinvented itself to remain relevant to the needs of its stakeholders. We are very grateful to all member states for their generous financial and intellectual support.

COL believes that learning must lead to sustainable development. To achieve sustainable development we need innovative approaches. But innovation can become a cliché if we do not raise the questions 'innovation for what' and 'innovation for whom'?

We need to contextualize innovation in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals and the diversity of our Commonwealth. If education is to contribute to sustainable development, we need to look beyond

targets and indicators. The focus must be on transformative learning which leads to the 3 Es; Economic growth, Equity, and Environmental conservation. At PCF 9, COL will share some of its innovations and how these are making a difference.

COL focuses on appropriate technologies that target the last person in the queue. When Cyclone Gita hit Tonga last year, the Minister of Education turned to COL. We have developed a low-cost device, Aptus, which provides digital resources even when there is no connectivity or electricity. Thousands of secondary school materials were loaded on Aptus and despatched to Tonga in record time so that children could resume classes.

COL develops innovative models which can be replicated in different contexts. COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers' project has lifted thousands of women out of poverty. In India, illiterate women learnt about agriculture and finance on their mobile phones in their own languages. Known as 'Voicemail Farmers', they have since established a farm producers company, generating thousands of dollars in assets.

COL develops innovative resources using new approaches. Working with UNESCO we have developed guides and policy briefs in emerging areas such as AI, Blockchain, MOOCs and OER. All COL resources are OER and have been translated into several languages, including Arabic and Chinese.

These examples give you a flavour of some of COL's innovations.

If we want to achieve quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030, we need to go beyond business as usual. The focus of PCF 9 is on innovations, where a diverse community from the Commonwealth and beyond, will come together to develop a roadmap for action so that no one is left behind.

Thank you for coming and please remember that all roads lead to Edinburgh come September!