

# COVID 19: COL Response

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Chair, Secretary General, Excellencies

Thank you for the opportunity to present COL—since we have already provided a detailed report, I will only focus on how COL has responded to the COVID 19 crisis.

Today 1.2 billion students globally are affected by lockdowns. In the Commonwealth, there are still 574 million students affected by institutional closures. Countries were clearly not prepared and had to look for immediate solutions. Online provision was the preferred option.

But how many students have access to electricity, computers and connectivity? Only half the world's population have access to the internet. In most regions of the Commonwealth with the exception of the Caribbean, internet connectivity is well below 50%.

As you know, the Commonwealth of Learning was established by Heads of Government to support Member States and institutions to use distance education and technologies for expanding access to education and training.

We have been promoting the use of distance education using a range of technologies from print to radio, TV and the internet. When the COVID crisis struck and campus institutions were forced to close, open universities remained open. COL surveyed 27 open universities in 2016 which had an enrolment of 4.4 million students. The scale that open universities achieve drives down the costs per university graduate to less than half of what their campus counterparts cost.

As teachers make the difficult transition from classroom teaching to online provision, they need capacity building. Here again distance education can be deployed to train large numbers. For example, the National Teachers Institute, Nigeria which is a distance learning institution has enrolments of over 150,000 every year. In India, the government's online platform trained 1.3 million teachers in two years.

Similarly, if the child cannot go to school, the school comes to the child. Open schooling, which is secondary education offered at a distance, is a cost-effective means of reaching learners who would otherwise not have the opportunity. Having left school at 12, when she was married, Rehana Sultan of Bangladesh was able to go back to school at the age of 22 when her three children asked for help with their homework. This was only possible by enrolling in an open school.

Research shows that there is 'no significant difference' between distance and traditional classroom instruction in terms of learning outcomes; yet there is a lingering perception, especially in the developing world, that distance education is not as effective as class-based education.

In addition to other benefits, distance education also has a low carbon footprint. Following research by the Open University, UK, COL conducted a similar study in Botswana, which found that the average carbon footprint of the distance learner is three times less than that of a campus student.

Social justice has always been the central mission of Distance Education. When crisis strikes, it is girls who are most at risk of dropping out of education. COL has initiated Commonwealthswomen, a mentorship programme for underprivileged girls which links them with eminent women—politicians, academics and professionals—who talk to them regularly using WhatsApp to develop leadership skills and aspire to a better future.

Another constituency that is in danger of being further marginalised during this crisis are people with disabilities. Even in normal circumstances, the participation of PWD in higher education has been low, especially in developing countries such as India and South Africa.

This is Preety Daby in Mauritius who could not pass her class 9 exam because of the lack of a braille textbook. COL has worked with the Global Rainbow Foundation to ensure that she has learning resources and assistive devices. She is doing well in class and plans to go to university.

COL offered two Massive Open Online Courses with Athabasca University, Canada and over 3000 teachers have been trained in the last eight weeks.

COL's MOOC for Development provides simple technology solutions such as a basic mobile phone interface, social media integration and delivery in low bandwidth situations to reach grassroots communities. These gardeners learnt horticulture in their local language through their basic mobile phones.

Finding the appropriate content that could be readily deployed during this crisis has been a major challenge. COL has been promoting the use of Open Educational Resources or OER which are free content that can be adopted, adapted and translated to suit specific contexts. What are the benefits? A study in Antigua & Barbuda showed that not only did the use of OER save costs for the students but also improved learning outcomes. When the Ebola crisis hit West Africa, COL sent OER for secondary schools to Sierra Leone for printing and distribution to students while they waited for schools to reopen.

COL initiated an International Partnership of Distance and Online Learning for COVID 19, which has attracted 55 partners from around the world. These include the Commonwealth Secretariat, the World Bank and UNESCO, universities such as the MIT and private partners like Coursera. The objective is to share resources and expertise and work collaboratively.

COL has joined hands with Coursera to facilitate free access to 3800 courses designed to skill and reskill Commonwealth citizens for livelihoods. These have been offered to ministries and partners in all 54 Member States.

COL has prepared a set of Guidelines for Distance Education for a range of stakeholders including governments, institutions, teachers, parents and students.

COL has also developed a series of 12 videos by a world authority on online learning. This is a crash course that policy makers and practitioners can complete in less than two and a half hours.

Having worked in the field of distance education for over 30 years COL can confirm that—distance education helps to increase access, improve quality, reduce costs and support inclusion, all with a lower carbon footprint.

The current challenge of COVID-19 has forced us to rethink our approach to education. It is time to build resilient education systems that are ready for future crises. We need to integrate distance and online learning into all educational systems, build the capacity of our teachers and focus on innovations, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalised.

COL has responded immediately to the crisis and will continue to work with Member States to make a smooth transition from response to resilience. Thank you for your contributions.