Introducing COL

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Greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning. Thank you for the opportunity to be virtually present. The Commonwealth of Learning is the youngest of the three intergovernmental organisations and was established when Canada hosted the 1987 CHOGM in Vancouver. Our headquarters are in beautiful British Columbia with a regional office the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in New Delhi. Given the diversity of our Commonwealth, we support regional centres for West Africa in Nigeria, for the SADC sub region in Botswana, the Pacific in Fiji and Malta hosts the Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning. What does COL do? Our mission is to expand access to education and training through distance learning and the use of technologies. COL was born at a moment when Canada had set up a satellite and was interested in using it for education.

In these times of COVID-19, the world has had to pivot to distance education and technology almost overnight. Technology will become an integral part of teaching and learning, where blended approaches—online and in-person—will be the new norm. As an intergovernmental organisation with the mandate to promote distance learning, COL is best placed to serve Member States as the demand for distance education grows. Namibia has recently requested COL to support the transition of the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL), an open school, into an open university, to provide quality tertiary education to thousands who would otherwise not have the opportunity.

The pandemic has also highlighted the wide inequalities that exist in our societies. Less than half the population of the Commonwealth has access to the Internet—how do we reach those on the other side of the digital divide? More girls are expected to drop out of school in the wake of the pandemic, and persons with disabilities (PWD) could face further marginalisation. COL is addressing each of these issues with innovations such as MobiMOOCs. COL is working with its partners and networks to mount a massive campaign involving communities and families on the benefits of education for girls to ensure that they are not left behind. COL is also supporting PWD by developing resources, training teachers and partnering with specialist organisations.

Job losses have been another unfortunate outcome of the pandemic, and re-skilling is now a pressing priority. COL, in partnership with the Coursera Workforce Recovery Programme, has provided free licenses to more than 115000 Commonwealth citizens, with 54% being women. Under each licence, a learner can access nearly 4000 professional online courses from 200 top universities in the world and earn multiple certificates, without the need to pay anything. Access to computers and connectivity was limited in many countries, but participants used their mobile devices and local library facilities. While 49 Commonwealth countries signed up, the maximum uptake has been in the Caribbean. Guyana has been the leader with 30,000 unemployed citizens enrolled. The Ministry of Education, Guyana and the Private Sector Commission have signed an MOU for recognising the credentials earned under this programme for employment purposes. Since COL colleagues found the courses beneficial, we also shared the Coursera

licences with staff at the Commonwealth Secretariat (COMSEC) and the Commonwealth Foundation (CF).

Partnerships and collaboration are essential in tiding over this crisis. COL is collaborating with COMSEC and the CF on youth development and empowering civil society, and we will continue to work together for a stronger Commonwealth that brings value to each Member State.

Because of the global acceptance of distance learning, COL has moved from margin to mainstream. Going forward, anything that can be done effectively online will be delivered online.

I look forward to briefing you more about our work in subsequent sessions.