

Commonwealth of Learning: Rethinking Education for Innovation, Growth, Innovation in a Post-Covid World



28 April 2022

Presentation of COL Progress Report and Workplan
21st Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (21CCEM)
Nairobi, Kenya

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Hon Ministers, it is an honour to present my organisation the Commonwealth of Learning or COL as it completes 35 years of service to the Commonwealth.

COL was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met for CHOGM in Vancouver 1987. Ever since, we have been in beautiful British Columbia with a regional office for Asia in New Delhi.

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

How well are we succeeding in this objective? We have prepared an account of our work entitled COL in the Commonwealth: Country Reports 2015-2021. The complete compendium of what COL has done across the Commonwealth is a substantial document and available on the COL website. We have only given you printed copies of reports relating to your country.

We have also prepared an Impact Report of the difference COL has made in the last six years. I hope you are pleased with the results.

You also have copies of our Strategic Plan 2021-2027 entitled 'Learning for sustainable development', developed after wide consultations around the Commonwealth. COL believes that learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

Our work is organized in two sectors: Education and Skills with Gender as a crosscutting theme.

Our strategy is to achieve impact by harnessing the potential of existing and new technologies.

The theme of this CCEM is rethinking education for innovation, growth and sustainability. We need alternative and innovative approaches to build back better. Let me share some examples of how COL promotes education for sustainability, growth and innovation.

First, sustainability. COL promotes open schools to provide flexible learning opportunities for secondary education. Open schools increase access and equity by reaching large numbers and are especially convenient for women and girls. In India, the National Institute of Open Schooling has a cumulative enrolment of 2.7 million students, 31% being female. Similarly, the Namibia College of Open Learning, enrolls about 65% girls. During the pandemic, the course materials of the open schools in Namibia and Botswana were distributed to secondary school students.

Open schools are also cost-effective. A COL study found that in India, an open school costs one tenth of what it costs to put a student through a government secondary school. Similarly in Namibia, students who go to NAMCOL pay one fifth compared to their counterparts in government secondary schools.

Open universities too remained open as campus institutions were forced to close during the pandemic. The Commonwealth has 33 open universities that provide tertiary education to over 5 million learners each year at about one third the cost of campus education with comparable outcomes.

In addition to the many benefits of distance learning, it also has a low carbon footprint. COL conducted a study in Botswana, which found that the average carbon footprint of the distance learner is nearly three times lower than that of their campus counterpart. Open schools and open universities are a sustainable model for both developed and developing countries.

Ministers of Education mandated COL to support a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth to strengthen existing tertiary institutions. All 32 small states are members and collaborate on course development. COL worked with the University of Seychelles to offer MOOCs on the Blue Economy and all resources are available to the other members.

As the climate crisis assumes greater urgency, we need to adopt a green learning agenda. This agenda would focus on developing the skills for green jobs for a transition to a low carbon economy; green life skills for a more sustainable future and skills for a green transformation that addresses social justice. We are preparing a report with concrete recommendations that will be despatched to you shortly.

Providing access to education is no longer enough – we also need to provide opportunities for economic growth.

During the pandemic, the COL-COURSERA workforce recovery project offered free skilling and reskilling opportunities from some of the top universities in the world to over 150000 Commonwealth citizens. Even though connectivity was often a challenge, learners used mobile devices or library facilities in what has been a life-changing experience for thousands.

COL's Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme is offered by universities in 11 countries. A recent study conducted at the Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan indicates that graduates of this programme saw an increase of 38% in their monthly income and every \$ invested resulted in \$3.40 direct returns for the learners.

In Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, 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.

We know that a large percentage of those graduating from the educational system today lack the skills for employment. During this time, COL supported several universities to integrate employment pathways into their systems, with positive outcomes.

Without innovations, there can be no rethinking of education – for COL, innovations are not just about technologies but also about models, methods and processes.

COL developed AptusPi 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. This has been successfully deployed in 13 countries.

The most recent being Maldives and The Bahamas. For low bandwidth contexts in the Pacific, COL developed a video-on-demand service, in STEM subjects aligned to the curriculum of Fiji, Nauru and Samoa.

As teachers made the transition from classroom teaching to online provision, they needed capacity building. COL provided specific MOOCs for teacher training. The course offered in T&T covered 50% of the entire teaching community in the country.

COL, supported teacher educators in the Kenya Institute of Special Education to develop resource materials for Inclusive Education. These have been implemented in 20 schools and the resources are available in online, videos and print formats.

To address the issue of lack of access to ICT, COL initiated an ICT augmentation project for small states and LDC's to provide specific equipment, solar panels, connectivity and capacity building. Partner institutions have been identified initially in Antigua & Barbuda, Lesotho, Maldives and Seychelles.

These, Honourable Ministers, are a few examples of how COL is promoting sustainability, economic growth and innovations. At thirty-five, COL remains small and flexible to respond readily to your needs. COL is a source of world class expertise in open distance and technology-based approaches, develops innovative models and quality resources and supports capacity building. I invite you to make full use of these.

COL is organizing its triennial conference, the tenth Pan Commonwealth Forum in partnership with Athabasca University in Calgary during 14-16 September and we have invited you. I hope you will join us to enrich discussions on the theme of Innovations in Educational Resilience.

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