Open education in the time of COVID-19: lessons learned

We are now in year two of COVID-19. The pandemic has been marked by tremendous losses and disruptions and has widened inequalities. But it has also created new opportunities, notably in the area of remote learning. As the world pivoted to online and distance learning, open education gained greater acceptance. What would have taken years of advocacy happened within a matter of days.

For COL, open education means policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. Throughout the pandemic, COL has supported Member States to remove these barriers and address the needs of “the last person in the queue.” A few important lessons have surfaced along the way.

Open schools are a viable means to ensure the doors of learning stay open. COL has been promoting this distance learning model for secondary education. Not only did open schools remain open during the pandemic, but they were also able to provide printed course materials to students of regular schools in several countries — for example, in Botswana and Namibia.

As COVID-19 forced governments to cut back on resource allocations for education, there was a growing need for cost-effective solutions to bring quality learning to all. Open educational resources (OER) emerged as a way forward, helping bridge the divides and enabling the marginalised. COL has launched the Pacific Regional Channel, containing over 960 OER, to support the curriculum needs of Pacific island states.

Even as countries closed borders to contain the virus, open collaboration became essential to support current needs and build resilience for the future. COL’s OpenDoor partnership attracted more than 60 organisations, institutions and associations across the world, becoming a vibrant platform where partners have shared over 260 courses.

Open education is critical for sustainable development. It empowers learners to access quality opportunities for economic growth, participate in the process of effecting social change, and contribute to environmental conservation. Leaving no one behind requires full commitment, well beyond the pandemic.

“Leaving no one behind requires full commitment, well beyond the pandemic.”
New employment pathways for 150,000 learners

Over 150,000 individuals from the Commonwealth and beyond were able to unlock their potential through learning in the face of COVID-19. With the help of the COL–Coursera Workforce Recovery Initiative, they gained free access to 5,000 courses taught by highly reputed professors and mentors from top universities and companies around the world. For many, this was a pathway to regaining employment lost due to the pandemic. Course enrollments topped 1 million, and COL recognised at regional online convocations the achievements of learners who had obtained certificates.

The virtual convocation for the Pacific celebrated 127 learners from the region, who were joined by Professor Asha Kanwar, COL President and CEO, the Honourable Richard-Hyde Menke, Deputy Minister of Education, Nauru, and Mr Jeff Maggioncalda, CEO of Coursera. Calling the initiative “a lifeline” for those affected by the pandemic, the Deputy Minister noted its contribution to ensuring inclusive and equitable access to quality education for all.

Over 10,000 Asian learners were celebrated at an online convocation, with participation by the two partner organisations and dignitaries from the region. Increased confidence in building the right skillset for the labour market, as well as a sense of personal growth and achievement were a few of the experiences graduates shared. Learners were congratulated by the Honourable Tipu Munshi, MP, Commerce Minister, Bangladesh, the Honourable Dr Ibrahim Hassan, Minister of Higher Education, Maldives, and Professor Kapila Perera, Secretary, Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka.

Pacific Partnership for Open, Distance and Flexible Learning

An introductory course on OER for online learning with a focus on Pacific needs, teacher guides on re-versioning and integrating OER, as well as regional and national OER collections are just some of the tools and resources recently developed under the Pacific Partnership for Open, Distance and Flexible Learning. The four-year project aims to enhance the capacity and efficiency of education sectors in the Pacific through greater use of innovative delivery mechanisms and technology. It is implemented in partnership with the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development with funding from New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

To learn more, visit: https://pacificpartnership.col.org/

New collaboration with ILO

COL and its Regional Centre in Malta, 3CL, have partnered with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to foster lifelong learning and promote skills development via digital technologies. The focus is on countries in Africa, as well as small Commonwealth states (with a population of 1.5 million or less).

This new partnership will concentrate on sharing knowledge and expertise in educational technology, online and distance learning, the digitalisation of skills development, as well as technical and vocational education and training. The goal is to use the potential of technology to improve social inclusion and access to learning for employability.
COL has supported Zambia’s Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock to strengthen linkages between farmers and the ICT-based extension system, with the aim of increasing production and productivity for sustainable livelihoods. Through a newly created Mobile Fisheries and Livestock Advisory Information System (MFLAIS), the e-extension service delivery will be anchored to Zambia’s geographically vast community of emerging fisheries and livestock entrepreneurs. The MFLAIS platform will serve as an e-library for all the ministry’s acts, policies, technical materials, and case studies. It will offer tools for data collection and will address questions frequently asked by farmers. The Honourable Professor Nkandu Luo, Minister of Fisheries and Livestock, participated in the platform launch, noting that MFLAIS will maximise income generation in Zambia.

Professor Asha Kanwar moderated a panel discussion in the framework of the Commonwealth Women’s Entrepreneurship Summit 21. “Edtech for the New Normal” focused on the ways technology can empower women entrepreneurs for success and build their resilience in the face of COVID-19. Panelists talked about the skills necessary to empower women to be prepared for an increasingly changing and dynamic work environment and the biggest barriers to female entrepreneurship. They discussed opportunities and resources available for female entrepreneurs, the efficacy of massive open online courses and how micro-badging and micro-credentialling can assist women to get the necessary skills for embracing technology. Watch at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIwxCGV79gc

COL has partnered with Coursera, Google and Udemy to offer scholarships to learners across the Commonwealth in courses that build skills for work. Between 1 April and 30 September 2021, the first cohort of more than 18,600 individuals will gain free and unlimited access to employability-oriented courses taught by professors from leading universities and top industry leaders. For more details on how to enrol, please visit: www.col-skillsforwork.org

IN BRIEF

Listening for immunity

CEMCA reached over 1.8 million persons in rural, tribal and semi-urban areas of India as part of the “Listening for Immunity” public awareness campaign. Through 25 community radio stations, listeners learned about immunity-boosting measures for self-care during COVID-19. The campaign was carried out with funding from the Government of India.

Webinar series on micro-credentials

Higher education institutions are seeking models for offering training and certification in smaller units of learning directly tied to workplace needs. In response to this demand, COL organised a webinar series to explore micro-certification and the design and implementation of micro-credentials. It attracted over 200 participants from 24 Commonwealth countries.

Aptus for Antigua and Barbuda

To help minimise the disruption to learning brought about by COVID-19, COL has partnered with the Ministry of Education, Sports and Creative Industries in Antigua and Barbuda to pilot six Aptus devices in schools in Barbuda. Ministry IT professionals, teachers and other school personnel will benefit from training on how to use, maintain and teach with Aptus.

COL’s panel at Commonwealth Women’s Summit

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Innovative e-platform for Zambian entrepreneurs

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Building “skills for work” across the Commonwealth

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COL is offering three different certification programmes under the Skills for Work Initiative:
• COL–Grow with Google Skills for Work Certification Programme
• COL–Coursera Skills for Work Certification Programme
• COL–Udemy Skills for Work Certification Programme

For more details on how to enrol, please visit: www.col-skillsforwork.org
Empowering female educators in Nigeria

With COL’s support, 200 female educators from Nigeria have been trained to use mobile technologies to access eLearning resources, including OER. A recent five-day blended workshop hosted by the Centre for Girls Education brought together teachers, teacher educators and quality assurance officers from 40 schools in Zaria and Sabon Gari in the State of Kaduna. The training aimed at improving knowledge-sharing capabilities among teachers as well as ensuring learning continuity in Mathematics, English Language, Basic Science, Social Studies and Computer Science, the core subjects in which the region’s girls need tutorial support.

New platform for micro-courses

COL launched COL Commons, a platform that leverages the power of distance education and technology-enabled learning to build 21st-century skills for teaching, learning and employability. The new platform offers a constantly growing selection of micro-courses developed with support from leading experts. Learners will have access to interesting videos and quizzes, and upon the successful completion of the courses, they will receive COL certificates.

You can watch the video recording of the presentation here: https://youtu.be/Zmi3l_UFWiY

COL President addresses Asian Association of Open Universities

Professor Asha Kanwar was a keynote speaker at the 34th conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities. Her presentation, which was delivered virtually, focused on the lessons from COVID-19 that could be used to build education systems for a safer, more equal and more resilient future. For technology to be effectively harnessed to bridge the digital divide, it must be placed in an appropriate social, cultural and political context, she said. Professor Kanwar also spoke about the importance of mainstreaming OER by building the capacities of teachers, policy makers and learners. She called on ODL institutions to assume a leadership role to promote quality education, support innovation and address issues of social justice.

You can watch the video recording of the presentation here: https://youtu.be/Zmi3l_UFWiY

Jumping into the “courage zone”

With her father in jail and no sources of income, Khondokar Nilufa Yasmin Pias (Bangladesh) was about to be married off at the age of ten. Her child marriage was prevented with support from COL’s local partner CMES Rural Technology Centre. During the next several years, Khondokar received life-skills training on various social issues and honed her computer skills, ultimately securing a job as a computer operator. Most recently, she joined a major non-governmental organisation in Bangladesh as a computer trainer. Khondokar, who recently turned 20, is now able to support her family and contribute to the community.

Christina Zulu (Malawi) hails from Traditional Authority Nyoka. She dropped out of school in Grade 4 due to pregnancy, feeling that her life “was doomed.” With support from COL and its local partner Concerned Youth Organisation, Christina, who is now 21, was motivated to go back to school in January 2021. She is poised to complete her education and become a community role model.

Rimsha Amanat (Pakistan) comes from a family of seven and had to leave primary school due to her family’s dire poverty. It was the social mobilisation efforts of COL’s partner SPARC that helped Rimsha “jump out of her comfort zone, into the courage zone.” She enrolled in vocational and life-skills courses. While she was studying, her family tried to marry her off to a relative’s son, but SPARC helped prevent this early marriage. Rimsha was able to complete her vocational training in the field of cosmetics and start her own beauty centre in her village. With an average monthly income of Rs. 3,000, she feels that the financial situation of her family has improved. She is now encouraging her siblings to pursue education as an investment in their future.

Rahma Njengite (Tanzania) touched a computer for the first time several months ago when she enrolled in a programme facilitated by YAPO, COL’s local partner. With no appropriate skills to support herself, this young woman felt especially affected by the COVID-19 restrictions. She has now acquired computer skills and successfully completed online courses on food processing and packaging. Rahma is planning to set up a food kiosk to sell and deliver well-packaged snacks to customers in her village.
Helping Tuvalu fill the skills gap

With support from COL, 40 trainees from Tuvalu’s Public Works Department (TPWD) are now on their way to gaining formal qualifications in trades. They are part of the first cohort to benefit from the Building Construction and Allied Trades Skills programme, offered by the Tuvalu Atoll Science and Technology Training Institute (TASTTI). COL has been working with TASTTI to build its capacity to deliver trades training using digital resources. Close to 200 persons have already benefited from a training programme with modules on literacy, numeracy, painting, working with timber and working with concrete. The programme uses COL’s basic trades training OER. As a result, 45% of TPWD’s current workers responsible for maintaining the country’s public infrastructure are expected to gain formal qualifications through a blend of workplace and distance learning.

Professionalising youth work in The Bahamas

COL has partnered with The Bahamas Ministry of Education, The Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute, Mount Pleasant Green Baptist Church (The Bahamas) and Lakehead University (Canada) in a new project, ‘Supporting Youth Development: Professionalising Youth Workers in The Bahamas.’ Building on the success of a similar initiative in the Pacific, the project will focus on developing a suite of micro-courses for youth workers and leaders, with a view to their rapid upskilling. The virtual project launch featured a panel with the participation of the Honourable Jeffrey Lloyd, Minister of Education.

Online course development for SWAYAM

COL’s successes in blending online with workplace learning and assessment for practical skills were presented at the recent Skills Virtual Fair: South-South, hosted by the International Labour Organization. The fair aimed to identify innovative solutions for specific skills-development challenges, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Representatives from Yaba College of Technology in Nigeria and Luanshya Technical Business College in Zambia described how COL is helping build their training capacity, with a view to meeting the challenge of implementing technical and vocational education at a distance. COL supports south-south co-operation through an online community of practice, and there is further potential to increase scale and affordability by sharing digital OER and collaborating across countries for training.

Launched by FDP-MOOC
Development of Online Courses for SWAYAM

By

CEMCA offered a two-week MOOC to faculty of higher education institutions in India to build their capacity in developing courses for the SWAYAM learning platform. ‘Development of Online Courses for SWAYAM’ was initiated following the call by India’s University Grants Commission for educators to submit expressions of interest for creating undergraduate and postgraduate courses for the platform. Developed in partnership with experts from the Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata, the MOOC introduced learners to the framework for course development and provided step-by-step guidelines. More than 390 participants from higher education institutions joined the MOOC launch.

COL at South-South online fair
Flexible futures for education in a post-COVID world

Professor Asha Kanwar made a keynote presentation at the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand conference, organised in partnership with Massey University. She described COL’s response to the key education challenges faced by Member States during the pandemic, which included improving digital infrastructure and digital skills, and mitigating the impact of the learning crisis on the most vulnerable. “If we want to build back better,” she said, “we need a transformative approach powered by flexibility.” According to Professor Kanwar, this approach integrates an emphasis on education leading to employment or entrepreneurship and inculcating the values of environmental conservation and global citizenship.

agMOOCs for capacity building

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) has partnered with COL to build the capacity of academic staff to use agMOOCs for student and faculty training. A recent virtual workshop focused on the usefulness of agMOOCs for capacity building in agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa. Topics ranged from insights into aspects of agMOOC technology, to the role of academic faculty and leadership in contextualising skill sets, prospects for scaling up online courses, as well as certification and learner outcomes. A total of 110 participants from 28 countries welcomed the idea of MOOC-based learning as an avenue to fill capacity gaps with micro-credentialling. The next steps include awareness building for managers and academic leaders about aspects of developing, delivering and assessing agMOOCs.

Parental learning for better outcomes

COL has launched a new project aiming to develop the skills required to build and sustain partnerships between teachers and parents for the benefit of learners. Parental Learning for Uninterrupted Schooling (PLUS) nurtures partnerships for improved learning outcomes, especially in marginalised communities. In the framework of the project, COL supported a two-day workshop in Northern Ghana on parental involvement in learning. Organised in partnership with the NGO School for Life, the workshop was attended by 42 key stakeholders, including representatives from the Ghana Education Service, the Non-Formal Education Division, as well as community leaders, parents, teachers, and representatives of non-governmental and civil-society organisations. Participants discussed innovative strategies and measures to ensure the effective involvement of parents in the schooling of their children, including parents who are non-literate and have limited access to technology.
The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical need for support not just for academic matters but also for general well-being and mental health.

According to UNESCO, there is now a wider acknowledgement that “investment in well-being is central to ensuring that learners are ... able to cope with challenges and thus able to catch up on lost learning.” Caregivers, teachers and administrators also need support to build their resilience.

To promote well-being and mental health in these challenging times, here are some tools from Dr Laurie Santos, Professor of Psychology at Yale University:

1. Stay connected: Technology offers a viable alternative to staying together while keeping apart. It does require some scheduling and extra work, but the experience can be very beneficial.

2. Show gratitude: Writing down a few things that you are grateful for at the end of every day can quickly boost your well-being.

3. Get back to your healthy basics: Practising positive sleep habits, eating healthily and incorporating even half an hour of physical exercise every day can go a long way.

4. Find ways to be present: Getting into the present moment and taking the time to truly experience and savour what you’re doing, hearing, seeing, etc. can lift your spirits.

5. Practise mindfulness: While you can’t run away from a negative emotion, you can pay attention to how it makes you feel and nurture it with self-compassion.

Find out more from Dr Santos’ Happiness Lab podcast: https://www.happinesslab.fm/
Succeeding as a goat para-vet

Until the birth of her third child, Sangita Tupe worked as a daily wage labourer in her native village. The money was never enough, and the situation became especially dire when the family was forced to go into debt to cover medical expenses due to neo-natal complications.

Around that time, Sangita enrolled in a course organised by COL’s partner the Mann Deshi Foundation. After completing a tailoring workshop, she decided she was up for a new challenge — a programme that trained women as “sheli sakhi” or “goat para-vets.”

It was a huge step for someone who hails from a community where an emphasis on education and women’s empowerment is not the norm. Sangita says her husband supported her decision, but it was not easy to win people’s trust. “This is a male-dominated profession, and people were unsure whether I was up to the task,” she notes.

Ever since she started working as a sheli sakhi, Sangita’s skills, self-esteem and financial circumstances have improved significantly. She has become well-versed in digital technology and during the recent lockdown used WhatsApp to provide consultations on animal health to hundreds of farmers.

“That’s different now,” Sangita says. Not only was she able to pay off her debts but she has managed to cover the costs of expanding her family house as well. Sangita also bought a two-wheeler, which she uses for work.

Expanding access to quality online and blended learning is one of the strategic directions for The Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute (BTVI), and as Chair for its Business Trades Department, Ms Kerima Smith is invested in building the capacity of her team. Through a series of COL workshops, she gained the knowledge and skills to train BTVI instructors in monitoring and evaluation, quality assurance and online pedagogy.

Among the key takeaways, Kerima notes the importance of stimulating independent thinking and applying concepts for different types of learners while maintaining the institution’s standards. In addition, a course may be delivered fully online, but it still should stimulate a desire to learn. Cross-departmental collaboration to maintain quality control and implement corrective measures in learning systems is also important.

As a result of the training, Kerima was able to design and teach four online courses and provide feedback to faculty about the development of other online courses. She also offers regular training sessions to the members of her team.

“COL training brought out new skills that I did not even think I had,” she says. “I was in the passenger seat as an online learner, but now COL and the institute are giving me the opportunity to be in the driver’s seat as an online educator.”

“With COL’s support, we are championing a grassroots drive to end child marriages in Mchinji District, Malawi.”

– Harvey Chimaliro, CEO of CYO
EMPOWERING PEOPLE, SHAPING DESTINIES

No generational boundaries for ICT in education

Bagcinile Zungu is a 42-year-old stay-at-home mom who lives with her husband and five children in an informal location in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. Recently, together with her 22-year-old daughter, Nomfanelo, she completed the Commonwealth Digital Education Leadership Training in Action (C-DELTA) course. Bagcinile holds a degree in Health Science and Social Services as well as a Social Work Auxiliary Certificate, while her daughter is in the second year of a Bachelor of Education programme at the University of South Africa. Both wanted to further their education but had struggled with computer use.

Through C-DELTA, COL’s local partner SchoolNet SA develops digital literacy while fostering a deeper understanding about personal and professional networks. The mom and daughter have earned completion certificates and are now able to communicate with others using cellphones and laptops. They can upload their assignments online without having to pay someone to do it.

Bagcinile is planning to use her newly acquired skills to look for employment opportunities, and Nomfanelo intends to integrate ICT into her classroom practices. Both are looking forward to helping those who are struggling as they have.

Scaling up distance learning in Papua New Guinea

While appropriate technologies are important building blocks for open and distance education, it is enabled individuals who cement its success.

Ms Cleofe Dagale is Curriculum Officer at the Flexible, Open and Distance Education (FODE) division of Papua New Guinea’s Department of Education. She credits COL’s capacity-building programmes with empowering her educational growth.

According to Ms Dagale, COL’s courses are particularly suited for teachers in developing-country contexts who need to find and adapt open resources for teaching online as a result of COVID-19 disruptions.

With COL’s support, Ms Dagale has built capacity in materials design and distribution, and the development of learner support systems.

Ms Dagale is now involved in COL-led training on how to infuse OER into FODE courses and transform them for delivery online. She is confident that this will assist her institution “to scale up the quality of distance learning and offer more opportunities for students.”

Child marriage prevented in Malawi

While their peers are going to school, playing with friends and dreaming about their future, children who are married and become parents often face the prospect of poor life outcomes. They frequently drop out of school, have limited employment opportunities, live in dire poverty and experience gender-based violence.

This could have been the fate of two students from a primary school in a Malawi village, without the intervention of COL’s local partner. At 15, Alinafe became pregnant, and both she and the baby’s father, Nathaniel (16), dropped out of school. Arrangements were being made by their families for the teenagers to get married. With help from the Concerned Youth Organisation (CYO), Nathaniel’s family became aware of the legal and human-rights implications of child marriage. The marriage was called off, and he was readmitted to school. Alinafe, who has given birth to a baby girl, is also receiving ongoing support. She has enrolled in a CYO tailoring course, which allows her to look after her daughter while developing vocational and life skills. She anticipates returning to school when her baby is a little older.

COL has supported CYO to build local capacities, promote gender equality and change discriminatory social norms.
Since its establishment in 1984 by an act of parliament, the National University of Samoa (NUS) has become one of the key institutions helping the country meet its human resource needs. From its small beginnings (only 45 students in the University Preparatory Year), it has grown in leaps and bounds, with NUS graduates now accounting for approximately 80% of the Samoan workforce.1

In 1987, NUS launched its first degree, a Bachelor of Education programme. A year later, the Bachelor of Arts programme was taught. The first graduates in both programmes were awarded their degrees in the 1990 graduation ceremony. Shortly thereafter, the existing business-related night classes administered by the Samoa Society of Accountants came under the university’s umbrella, forming the Faculty of Commerce; the Faculty of Science was subsequently established. In 1993, the National Health Department’s School of Nursing amalgamated with the university to become the Faculty of Nursing. Four years later, the Western Samoa Teachers’ College amalgamated with the university as the Faculty of Education, and in March 2006, Samoa Polytechnic merged with NUS.

Fast-forward to 2021, and NUS now offers a wide range of certificates, degrees and diplomas, all the way to master’s and PhD programmes.

Information and communication technologies are powerful enabling tools for expanding access to and improving the quality of education. In this context, NUS and COL have a long history of successful collaboration, which has enhanced teaching and learning and created new opportunities for growth.2

COL, NUS and the Samoa Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture have collaborated on a research project to study the impact of COL’s “classroom without walls” Aptus device in primary, secondary and higher education environments. COL has also supported NUS to institutionalise technology-enabled learning, the key focus being policy development and capacity building for integrating technology in teaching and learning. In addition to a series of workshops, COL has assisted the university with setting up an open-access repository to offer blended learning courses.

NUS is an active member of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) and played a key role in developing the VUSSC Postgraduate Diploma in Education. Letuimanu’asina Dr Emma Kruse Va’ai, NUS Pro Chancellor, is a former member of COL’s Board of Governors and currently represents the Pacific region on the VUSSC Transnational Qualifications Management Committee.

COL has also worked with NUS in response to the university’s request that some of its programmes and qualifications be registered on the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). The Diploma in Sustainable Agriculture for Small States offered at NUS is now registered on the TQF. Most recently, COL and NUS have partnered to provide additional educational opportunities to those who have been disadvantaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the next three years, up to 900 individuals, including youths, women, girls, and persons with disabilities, will gain free access to high-quality skill-development courses offered by COL in partnership with the world’s leading eLearning providers. This will help reskill and upskill Samoan citizens in high-demand areas, including large-scale agriculture, tourism, manufacturing and social services.

Even before COVID-19 struck, there was an emphasis in the South Pacific region on how open, distance and flexible learning can help address issues of inequity and contribute to building education resilience, including in Samoa. NUS’s collaboration with COL is an integral part of the post-pandemic “reset,” aimed at further strengthening the university’s capacity. Their work together will contribute to the NUS vision of gaining national, regional and international recognition “as a vibrant and innovative centre of excellence in research, Samoan studies and quality teaching and training across all disciplines.”


2 Commonwealth of Learning
Building teacher capacity in assistive technologies

COL is working to build teacher capacity to provide quality learning opportunities to all, regardless of abilities and location. In Mauritius, 29 Special Education teachers completed a 12-week pilot course on disabilities needs assessment and assistive technologies. The project was carried out in partnership with the Global Rainbow Foundation, Mauritius, and Diversity and Ability, UK. Course participants gained skills in how to choose appropriate technologies that are accessible and affordable and can help bridge existing inequalities. The pilot has generated interest around the Commonwealth, with the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Tonga requesting COL’s support to contextualise and offer this programme locally. MOE launched the course in June for Tonga’s inclusive education staff, teachers and NGO disability practitioners.

Integrating table banking in Tanzania’s laws

COL has been providing multifaceted support to bring children back to school in Nigeria. The flexible range of strategies has included community outreach on motorcycle by a team from the University of Nigeria’s Researchers on ICTs in Higher Education in Africa (RICTHE). RICTHE representatives paid weekly visits to learners’ homes, offering the services of a mobile library. The materials included audio memory cards, disks and printed materials for children to borrow, interact with, use for activities and return. Based on the needs of out-of-school children and their parents, a set of OER in local languages has been developed.

Teaching with virtual reality

CEMCA and Ravenshaw University, Cuttack co-hosted a hands-on workshop titled ‘Virtual Reality (VR) Teaching and Learning.’ The workshop brought together 42 faculty members and research scholars from the Department of Education to build their capacity in developing VR materials. Participants practised preparing lesson content using a 360-degree VR platform.

COL’s work supports the creation of legal environments that contribute to sustainable livelihoods in Member States. In Tanzania, a special project aims to integrate table banking and lifelong learning for farmers (L3F) into the country’s legislation.

A recent workshop organised by COL with its local partner Matumaini Mapya brought together key stakeholders, including officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and the Tanzania Cooperative Development Commission.

During the workshop, findings of two studies were shared: about L3F’s impact on the welfare of farmers and about the role of table banking and L3F in strengthening savings and credit co-operatives. Participants discussed a strategy to implement key recommendations.

Reaching out-of-school children by motorcycle

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Developing online assessments for Belize

One of the current challenges for educators is that simply duplicating face-to-face assessment activities in an online environment does not work. This makes professional development with a focus on designing assessment experiences for online learners especially relevant at this time. With COL’s support, the University of Belize launched a course for faculty titled ‘Designing and Developing Online Assessments.’ Participants developed and practised skills relevant to designing and conducting assessments for online or blended courses they currently teach or anticipate teaching. In the coming months, approximately 100 educators are expected to benefit from three offerings of the course. It also has the potential to impact teachers in other educational institutions across Belize.

Recognising that distance education might present challenges for teachers and learners in under-resourced settings, COL supported the Freetown Teachers College to organise a learning infrastructure workshop. It brought together 76 teachers and teacher educators and was also attended by an official from the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education. The workshop featured the skills and resources needed to reach students outside the traditional classroom environment. Participants appreciated the opportunity to cover the syllabus in an asynchronous mode, “when students are absent from classes due to unavoidable circumstances.”
C-DELTA trainings across the Commonwealth

COL’s Commonwealth Digital Education Leadership Training in Action (C-DELTA) engages with governments, educational institutions, teachers and civil society organisations to build capacities across the Commonwealth. As part of the programme, COL trained future trainers in Africa and Asia. Responding to the needs of the Seychelles Ministry of Education, COL organised an online training-of-trainers workshop for 32 teachers from primary and secondary schools across the country. Another workshop aimed to assist Kibabii University, Kenya to adopt C-DELTA and brought together 24 faculty members. In India, the Model Institute of Education and Research, Jammu and Kashmir region, hosted an online training of trainers for 47 teachers, who will now encourage other teachers and students to take C-DELTA as a non-credit course.

Introduction to artificial intelligence

In partnership with COL, the Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP) launched the MOOC ‘Introduction to Artificial Intelligence (AI) for IT and Non-IT Professionals.’ It aims to inspire learners to adopt this exciting new field and allay fears in a general audience. The course introduces basic AI concepts and techniques and offers material for further studies in the field for those who want to gain additional proficiency. It has been offered through the VUP platform, attracting close to 22,000 learners since its launch in late 2020. COL is planning to extend the course across the Commonwealth and will also offer micro-credentials for those who complete it.

Using virtual labs for science courses

Laboratory-based science programmes have been challenging to deliver during the COVID-19 crisis, requiring educators to explore alternative ways of providing rigorous and productive learning experiences for students. With support from COL, Kenyatta University (KU) is exploring the feasibility of virtual labs using software that offers high-resolution simulations. These virtual labs would directly integrate with the higher education science curriculum.

Following a feasibility study to test the efficacy of software for labs in Chemistry, Biology and Zoology, KU faculty are now implementing pilot projects involving students. Based on the results, a decision will be made about how to expand the use of virtual labs as a component of lab-based science courses at the university and at other partner institutions in Africa.

Blockchain in education

COL has partnered with its Regional Centre in Malta, 3CL, to deliver an online workshop series titled ‘Blockchain in Education: Processes for Implementation.’ Over the course of three sessions, 30 participants from 13 countries were educated in the applications and technical components of blockchain technology for educational purposes. Four institutions presented their strategy documents, with a focus on awarding credentials using blockchain technology and developing curricula.

mobiMOOC technology for bankers

Blending the features of Internet technology with a delivery system via phone calls, mobiMOOCs provide an opportunity for scalable learning. COL has successfully used this technology to link thousands of farmers to quality learning and has recently repurposed it for other sectors. A meeting at the Andhra Pradesh State Cooperative Bank evaluated the results of a mobiMOOC delivered to more than 900 members of its staff. Participants in ‘Business Development for Primary Agricultural Cooperative Society (PACS): Credit and Non-credit’ appreciated the content and ease of delivery. This mobiMOOC technology can be replicated by other banks working to improve farm credit management in the Commonwealth.
Developing ethical approaches to learning technology

This global pandemic has changed the learning technology landscape across sectors here in the UK and across the globe. Never before have learners of all ages engaged with learning, teaching and assessment using digital technologies at this scale. Never before has the role of learning technologists been as important — or as challenging — as it has been since 2020. Scaling up technology use at this rapid pace prompted knowledge sharing and community support, as individuals and institutions shared resources and expertise freely, and thousands of professionals took part in CPD and training activities online.

Recent findings from ALT’s Annual Survey 2020 paint a picture of learning technologists at the helm of moving over 90% of provision to online and blended formats. The survey further indicates that 65% of learning technologists are working on revising institutional policies.

This shift continues to put learning technologists here in the UK and elsewhere under pressure, placing them centre stage in the role of supporting, training and guiding staff and students. In this context, finding ethical approaches to using digital technologies at scale is at the heart of long-term strategies for online and blended learning. Whilst there are wider concerns about the impact of the pandemic on access to and participation in education, ALT’s Annual Survey 2020 shows that learner engagement continues to be the number one driver for the use of learning technology — a trend that has remained constant for the past five years.

Learning technology has played a very important and positive role in enabling learning to continue during a global crisis, but at the same time, the increase in the use of digital education tools has forced many institutions to address concerns from students regarding tools such as proctoring software, and surveillance-like techniques used to track learning and engagement. Alongside students’ concerns, staff have highlighted the importance of the governance and implementation of technology used in education.

The survey also helped identify a gap between institutional ethical policies and efforts developers and providers are making — a lack of an overarching ethical framework that can be used by individuals, institutions and providers. In the UK, we have seen an increase in senior and leadership roles in learning technology, with 20% of survey respondents indicating that leadership is now the main focus of their role — and this opens up an opportunity for institutional and national policies for learning technology.

Building on the established professional accreditation framework for learning technology, CMALT, which was expanded in 2019 to include ethical considerations for professional practice and research, a working group has thus begun to work on establishing a dedicated ethical framework for professional practice in learning technology.

The initial aim is to provide a starting point for informing the ethical use of learning technology for individuals, institutions and industry and to explore questions such as:

- What are the biggest issues emerging in ethical approaches to online and blended learning and teaching?
- In what contexts does the need for an ethical framework arise, and what are practical examples of these?
- What would the framework need to provide for individuals, institutions and industry?

The working group, which is active in higher education as well as other education and training sectors, has received input, including resources and a list of organisations that may help inform the framework, and it has worked to define a set of ethical principles that will form the core of the new framework.

As well as these principles, tools need to be developed, such as case studies, example policies, and reflective questionnaires, to help individuals, institutions and industry see how these principles can be put into action. Central to the group’s work is this definition of learning technology:

We define learning technology as the broad range of communication, information and related technologies that are used to support learning, teaching and assessment. We recognise the wider context of learning technology policy, theory and history as fundamental to its ethical, equitable and fair use.

If you are interested in the development of the framework, there are still opportunities to contribute and provide input to help shape it. The Working Group remains open for all to join.

To find out more, please visit https://go.alt.ac.uk/EdTechEthics.

1 The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) supports a collaborative community for individuals and organisations from all sectors, including further and higher education and industry, and provides professional recognition and development. More information about the survey is available at: https://www.alt.ac.uk/about-alt/what-we-do/annual-survey.

2 https://www.alt.ac.uk/about-alt/what-learning-technology
NEW RESOURCES

Commonwealth of Learning Strategic Plan 2021–2027

Developed against the backdrop of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Plan reinforces COL’s role as an enabler, capacity builder and catalyst for educational development. It draws on COL’s wealth of experience in open, distance and technology-enabled learning to increase access to quality lifelong learning opportunities for all. Within the framework of SDG4 and the priorities of Member States, COL has developed a programme that promotes “learning for sustainable development.” In 2021–2027, COL will continue to organise its work in two sectors, Education and Skills, with Gender Equality and Technology-Enabled Learning as cross-cutting initiatives. The change in approach includes a greater focus on innovation, inclusion and measuring impact.

http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/3871

Quality and Equity in Digital Learning: Policy Brief

High-quality digital learning offers potential economic and social advantages but also could easily widen the gap between economically advanced and low-income countries. It could generate increasing inequity between the rich, who can afford the technology, and the poor, who will not be able to access it. The main purpose of this policy brief is to look at what policies are needed to maintain high-quality and equitable access to digital learning, especially in light of experience from responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It addresses technological, social and age factors influencing access to and uses of digital learning and makes recommendations for governments, institutions and teachers.

http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/3873

COL in the Commonwealth: 2015–2021

This compendium summarises COL’s activities over the last six years, detailing its achievements in each Member State and across the Commonwealth. The publication describes not only how COL has addressed country needs in education and training but also how its work supports the priorities of its development partners: Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In 2015–2021, COL fostered partnerships, built capacity, supported the development of materials and replicable models, and enabled policies. Its success has been possible through support from ministries of education as well as partner organisations and experts.

http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3885

Out-of-School Children: A Contemporary View from the Pacific Island Countries of the Commonwealth

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges facing the education systems in nine Commonwealth Pacific island states as well as the strategies already in place to improve accessibility and engagement in education through open schooling. It can be tailored to the needs and the context, and it can be both cost-effective and cost-efficient. An integrated approach to open schooling can build a bridge between knowledge acquisition and skills development and has the potential to reduce inequalities and address the needs in most of these countries.

http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/3779

Quality and Equity in Digital Learning: Policy Brief

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http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/3873
AI-based assessments

Academic assessments have always aimed to rigorously evaluate students’ understanding of concepts and topics. Unfortunately, the traditional and well-established “pause and test” approach does not achieve this; at best, it provides a shallow snapshot of a student’s understanding at an instant in time. Continuous assessment approaches, such as factoring in term work, have been used, but questions about their reliability and authenticity have put an upper limit on the weight given to such evaluations. Individualised feedback on assignments, which is another important component of the learning process, poses an additional challenge for teachers, since providing accurate and useful feedback becomes a tedious and almost herculean task, even with standard class sizes.

Educators want to align assessments with classroom instruction as well as mimic real-world scenarios to evaluate whether students can properly apply their acquired knowledge. Test scheduling is also an important issue. The “one-schedule-suits-all” approach does not consider when individual students are ready to demonstrate their mastery of a particular skill or concept, yet assessing the latter using the conventional pen-and-paper approach is virtually impossible to implement.

However, technology now exists that could make dreams of effective assessments a reality. Artificial intelligence (AI) has been used in personality assessments for quite some time via expert-developed algorithms, and experiments with academic assessments have also been undertaken. Adaptive tests created using AI can offer students timely and engaging academic assessments. Personalising such tests could enable specific and actionable measurement of a student’s skills. This would provide teachers with the insight to implement individualised interventions and create an optimal path for students to achieve success. The body of knowledge acquired in the fields of game theory and machine learning can contribute towards developing such an approach to assessments.

One major hurdle in using AI for assessment has been the very limited interactions between students and the systems that could be used for creating custom assessments and pathways. Only a few top-tier universities have inducted technology into the teaching–learning process to any significant extent, most only pay lip service to technology and, at best, use it to offer academic support through notice boards and announcements. However, a silver lining to the dark pandemic cloud hovering over the world is that an entire generation of learners has now experienced the flexibility afforded by online learning, and this format is here to stay!

This is the ideal opportunity for governments and educational institutions to invest in the technology necessary to create platforms that truly facilitate the learning process for their students. Once students are put in constant touch with these platforms, we can begin moving towards continuous evaluation and feedback. All three stakeholder groups — teachers, students and parents — can be sufficiently informed and benefit from timely information that could help avert many of the factors that lead to shallow learning or school leaving. Teachers, in particular, will gain deep insights into how their students learn, what support they require and the progress they make towards their learning goals.

The time to act is now. An agenda based on technology investments and learning platform implementation needs to be articulated and enacted by governments and institutions. AI-based assessment can then become a reality and go mainstream, and all stakeholders will benefit.