

Commonwealth Cooperation in Distance Education: Potential Benefits for Small States



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Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be here in Trinidad and in the Caribbean. In my first year as President of the Commonwealth of Learning I am trying to visit each of the six major regions of the Commonwealth: Central and West Africa; East and Southern Africa; the Pacific; South Asia; Europe/North America, and the Caribbean.

Two weeks ago I was in West Africa, in Ghana, where, after I had met President Kufuor, my hosts took me to the Castle at Cape Coast which was a main centre of the British slave trade. During my time at UNESCO I had visited the Île de Gorée, in Senegal, which was the shipping point for the French slave traders. But Cape Coast Castle is an altogether bigger affair. They told me that somewhere between twelve and twenty million people went out from there, through what they called The Door of No Return, to the waiting ships.

Some of those people were the ancestors of many the wonderful people that I have met in this trip to the Caribbean. Seeing both ends of the slave route in the space of two weeks has brought home to me the enormity of this blot on human history and the horror of this shameful example of man's inhumanity to man. Today I am here to celebrate and develop the positive links between Commonwealth countries, but we must not forget the terrible triangular trade that linked Britain, West Africa and the Caribbean for more than a century.

But, if I turn now to contemporary cooperation within the Commonwealth, I am delighted that my first trip to the Caribbean as President of the Commonwealth of Learning, which I shall call COL, should

coincide with the launch of CARADOL. COL is pleased to support this new organisation whose purposes fit perfectly with our own. The creation of CARADOL also evokes the title that you have given me for this short talk, namely Commonwealth Cooperation in Distance Education: Potential Benefits for Small States. The creation of the Caribbean Regional Association for Distance and Open Learning signifies a desire on your part to take cooperation between you a step further. I shall announce a little later one very tangible way in which the creation of CARADOL allows COL to increase its work in this region.

I shall begin by emphasising that all Commonwealth cooperation, whether in distance education or in other fields, is very much about small states. Small states account for two-thirds of the 53 countries of the Commonwealth. Furthermore the small states of the Commonwealth account for three-quarters of all the world's small states. This means that small states are central to the notion of the Commonwealth and therefore that the work of the Commonwealth should be of special importance for small states.

After making some comments about the special situation of small states I shall outline what the Commonwealth of Learning, COL, is doing to help small states. We are always eager to increase the relevance and impact of that work. I shall talk particularly about the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth which the Ministers of Education have asked us to establish.

However, I do not want to leave the impression that COL's agenda is mostly about higher education. I like to think that COL has already made a useful contribution to higher education in the Caribbean in various ways, and that will continue. But ministerial priorities evolve and COL's task is to be sensitive to new needs.

Throughout the world governments have committed themselves, since 2000, to using the Millennium Development Goals as the framework for their action. That action, of course, varies from country to country, depending on how far the different goals have been attained in a particular jurisdiction. COL now organises much of its work within the general framework of the MDGs whilst orienting its particular actions in line with the priorities of each country.

The timing of my visit is also important because COL is already developing its plan of work for the 2006-09 triennium, which we shall present to the Commonwealth Ministers of Education at their conference next year. To underpin the plan we have commissioned environmental scans in the different regions of the world. Dennis Irvine and Nancy George are leading the scan for this region. We are also holding regional consultations, like the event that we held here last evening, and these have already involved hundreds of people around the world. In this way we shall ensure that COL acts in response to your needs.

The Special Needs of Small States

So let me focus for a moment on the general needs of small states. It would be superfluous for me to talk at any length about life in small countries, whether they are landlocked states like Swaziland, Lesotho and The Gambia, or small islands like most of the Caribbean Commonwealth. Most of you come from small states so you know more about the opportunities and the challenges that they face than I do. Looked at in a world perspective and from the perspective of the Millennium Development Goals, small states face

some special challenges.

The most obvious is simply being small. A small territory means that natural resources are limited in quantity and variety. A small population makes it difficult for a country to have skilled and qualified people in all the many occupations and trades that underpin a modern economy.

Then there is the tyranny of transport. Small landlocked states face difficulty and expense in getting their traded goods to and from ports in neighbouring countries. Island states face the challenges of distance from markets and the cost of sea and air links.

Lately we have become more aware of the special environmental challenges that face small states. Even more recently the occurrence of natural disasters such as the hurricane in Grenada, the tsunami in the Maldives and the floods in Guyana has reminded the world that small states are both particularly prone to natural calamities and especially vulnerable to their effects. A huge country like India has the resources and people to help the very small proportion of its population that suffered from the tsunami along its south-eastern coast. In the Maldives, on the other hand, although the number of casualties was much smaller than in India, the effect on the society and the economy is much greater.

COL is helping small states in a number of ways. At the most general level we try to make it easier for these states to work together on educational matters. Thus we have supported meetings of the Chief Education Officers of the Caribbean, because we believe that it is helpful for these senior officials to compare notes on a regional basis. The CEOs meeting previous to this one was actually held in Dunedin, New Zealand, last July, at COL's Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. A memorable moment at that event was a gathering of the Caribbean CEOs with their equivalents from the Pacific Islands, where the two groups discovered and discussed numerous challenges they have in common.

A recent example of COL's role in the Caribbean is our work with the Caribbean Examinations Council, the CXC, to train and equip the staff to develop learning materials for subjects in the CSEC and CAPE curricula. The Minister, Mrs Manning, held a little ceremony here yesterday to mark the adoption of these materials in Trinidad and Tobago. From COL's point of view this is a nice example of a sustainable innovation that clearly improves the education system. The CXC now has the capacity to continue producing materials on more subjects and has built this into its budgets. The materials themselves help teachers by giving them clear points of reference for the curricula and they help students, particularly adult students, by making it possible for them to do much more study on their own.

That is an example of COL's work in helping an institution to develop an application of open and distance learning. The other areas in which we help governments and organisations are in the formulation of policy on technology-mediated education and in the creation and improvement of technology-based education and training systems. We are very pleased to have been of service to our host country, Trinidad and Tobago in its impressive work on developing an ICT policy for education.

Our overall aim is to help countries in their development by making it easier for people to learn. When you think about it the attainment of any one of the Millennium Development Goals will require a massive

increase in human learning.

I am not just talking about those goals that refer specifically to education, like the goal of attaining Universal Primary Education by 2015, but all the goals. We shall never attain the goals for reducing hunger and poverty unless millions of farmers and smallholders learn new ways of growing crops and ways of growing new crops. The achievement of the health goals, whether in the reduction of disease, of infant mortality or maternal mortality, requires not just improved health services but for millions of people to learn how to live more healthily.

All of COL's work is based on the principle that traditional methods of teaching and learning cannot cope with the scale of the task. In most other areas of life technology has transformed the way we do things, mostly for the better. COL's aim is to harness technology to increase the scope and scale of learning.

So here in the Caribbean, for example, we are working with farmers in several countries to bring them knowledge that could improve their livelihoods. Agriculture in the Caribbean is facing a crisis as terms of trade change. Agricultural extension units, working in traditional ways, struggle to serve the multiple needs of the region's many small farmers. Through COL's media empowerment programme we provide extension units and NGO's with the equipment and training necessary to enhance the scope, scale and impact of their information messages in a way that generates productive dialogue amongst the farmers themselves.

To mention a quite different example, at the level of policy we are helping governments to get to grips with the changing scene of higher education. Open and distance learning has a long history in the Caribbean but ODL is changing, notably with the development of eLearning, and higher education is changing, notably with the growth of private providers and the expansion of cross border provision, both distance learning and the creation of offshore campuses. Most governments are trying to make sense of all this so that they can take advantage of the trends to increase access to higher education for their citizens whilst protecting the student, as consumer, from fraudulent operators and low quality provision.

This is particular challenge in the Caribbean where the first step, which is to reach agreement on the need for action at the regional level, seems to be very difficult. If each country makes its own offers on education under the General Agreement on Trade in Services without consulting the others, and if each country tries to set up its own accreditation service, the result is likely to both costly and unhelpful to students. However, if a political will to act regionally does emerge, COL can help with the development of policies and structures. We have been closely involved in the exercise of developing guidelines for cross border education that is being completed by the OECD and UNESCO.

Finally, I must say a word about a new initiative of the ministers of education which is meant to serve the Caribbean, namely the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. This idea emerged at the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers held in Halifax, Canada in 2000. At that time, you will recall, the dotcom frenzy was at its height and the talk was of an unstoppable revolution in education that would sweep away all previous educational methods. The ministers from small states, concerned that their countries did not have the critical mass of expertise and technology to operate confidently in this

new world, asked COL to work with them on a proposal for a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

The key idea was that by acting collectively these states could be players in the world of eLearning, and would not need to depend solely on offerings from bigger countries. The ministers revisited the idea when they met in Edinburgh in 2003 and asked COL to proceed. In doing so we are operating on three principles.

First, we are building the VUSSC from the bottom up. Instead of offering a ready-made institution with a programme of courses we have asked governments and institutions to tell us what their priorities are for such a vehicle. As particular areas emerge as priorities for several countries COL will put together coalitions of the willing to develop the necessary courses and systems.

Second, following from the decision to be guided by country priorities, we do not have any preconceived notions about the level and content of provision. The ministers called the VUSSC a 'university' but we imagine that provision will cover a range of areas, probably with the main focus on various technical and vocational topics related to livelihoods.

Third, although the ministers used the word 'virtual', we interpret that in its widest sense to mean any appropriate use of technology, be it print, radio, video or eLearning. All the experience of the last thirty years teaches us that what counts is not the particular medium used but the quality of thinking that goes into curriculum development, pedagogical design and student support.

However, we expect that many countries will see this as an opportunity to increase their capacity to exploit the Internet and develop eLearning. COL is well equipped to respond help those who want to move in this direction because we are at the centre of the various developments that are coming together to facilitate eLearning.

I refer first to Learning Management Systems, which are the software platforms on which eLearning courses run. COL's aim here is to help countries and institutions make good choices that do not lead to nasty surprises of large additional costs just as the project is getting operational. In this respect Ken Sylvester's earlier presentation about CKLN was music to my ears, because CKLN is clearly going to be a force for getting the region to converge on an open source Learning Management System.

Second, I refer to learning objects and the repositories in which they are stored. One of the great advantages of eLearning is that it is cheap and easy to share learning materials, which we call learning objects. This also makes it much easier for people in different countries to work together on developing learning objects, which is one of the aims of the VUSSC.

In both these areas, Learning Management Systems and Learning Objects, COL will promote and facilitate the use of Free and Open Source Software, or FOSS for short. The extension of the concept of open source software to the arena of learning objects is one of the most hopeful developments in education in years, because it will make the sharing, adaptation and re-use of learning materials so much

easier. Here is a product of globalisation and technology that could be of great benefit to developing countries and a break with the sad tradition that new technology often results in a transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich.

So, in closing, I pledge COL's support to work of the members of CARADOL. I hope that you will use COL, and particularly the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, as catalyst for cooperation within this region. I found the presentation on CKLN enormously encouraging because that will provide much of the infrastructure and the glue that will make collaboration on the creation of learning objects possible.

In this context I had an excellent meeting this morning with Mr. Colm Imbert, the Minister responsible for tertiary education here in Trinidad and Tobago, who has a clear vision of what this Virtual University initiative should and should not be.

In expressing my best wishes to CARADOL I have a happy announcement to make. Every two years COL holds a Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. The first was held in Brunei, the second in Durban, South Africa and the third in Dunedin, New Zealand, last year. At the Dunedin conference we invited bids to host the 4th Pan-Commonwealth Forum and received four offers, including one from the Caribbean coordinated by Professor Stewart Marshall of UWI.

I am delighted to announce that after a rigorous selection process the choice has fallen on the Caribbean. Late next year practitioners of distance and open learning from all over the Commonwealth will come to Jamaica to share experiences and initiate further cooperative ventures. I am absolutely delighted by this decision and I am sure that hosting the whole Commonwealth will be a most exciting opportunity for CARADOL and its members. I congratulate all those involved.

My colleagues and I look forward to working with you to make the 4th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning a stellar success. Meanwhile, I congratulate you on creating CARADOL and wish the new association well.