

Internationalisation of Education without Commercialisation



Internationalisation of education without commercialisation: The Commonwealth of Learning's President describes how the organisation serves the developing nations of the Commonwealth

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Transcript

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While the Education and Training For All challenge has remained largely the same since The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was established 12 years ago, there have been dramatic changes in the delivery mechanisms available to address that challenge.

New technologies and pedagogies are offering solutions for closing the gap between the demand for, and supply of, this vital social service. Global discussions - the World Education Forum/Education for All (Dakar, 2000), the Global Knowledge II Forum (Kuala Lumpur, 2000), the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (Durban, 1999), the International Congress on Technical and Vocational Education (Seoul, 1999), UNESCO's World Conference on Higher Education (Paris, 1998) and others - have all reaffirmed the promise afforded by learning technologies and distance and open learning strategies, including common-place small media such as radio.

Founded in 1987, The Commonwealth of Learning was inspired by the vision that the peoples of the Commonwealth must and can have access to knowledge, regardless of where they live and whether they are rich or poor. Member Governments have given COL a mandate, and provided core funding, to encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education knowledge, materials, expertise, technologies and other resources.

Working with and providing services to hundreds of institutions throughout the 54-member Commonwealth, COL is helping to increase the capacities of developing nations to meet the demands for improved access to quality education and training.

COL's Three-year Plan 2000 - 2003, which was presented to and endorsed by Commonwealth Ministers of Education in November 2000, benefits from COL's decade of experience and builds upon it. During this period, COL has been active in higher education but has lately intensified its work with Commonwealth Governments and institutions in areas such as literacy, basic education, gender-specific programmes, technical/vocational education, teacher training, and continuing and professional education.

Often in partnership with other international agencies and always in partnership with local agencies, COL's assistance has added value to national efforts, contributing knowledge and providing information on distance and open learning.

COL embraces the internationalisation of education but does not endorse the over-commercialisation of what is essentially a social good. As chief executive officer, my first responsibility is to the people of the developing countries of the Commonwealth, through their Governments, and it is my strong belief that many, though not all, offshore and online education programmes that have been launched in recent years, or are now being contemplated, do not serve the interests of the citizens of those countries, in terms of relevance, quality and cost.

In many developing economies, higher education is seen as a key component of nation-building, but offshore curricula rarely address local human capital development needs. In fact, the increasing availability of offshore degrees will very likely provide an avenue for the privileged class - those that have the ability to pay the high fees - to find jobs away from home, exacerbating a brain drain that is already prevalent. There is also the danger that the local academic community could become demoralized if it starts to see itself serving only the second best.

Local legislation dealing with quality and curriculum can be applied with some success to foreign institutions operating in real space. But this is much more difficult to do with those operating in cyberspace, especially given the global desire to see the unfettered and free flow of information and knowledge.

There is also a growing international recognition of the need to be mindful of the implications of this development and to be conscious of the potential impact of calls to make education simply another tradable service. A failure to give primary importance to its nature as a public good risks affording less than scrupulous institutions, seeking to peddle second-rate education to the uninformed, a refuge in bodies such as the World Trade Organization.

Development of local capacities must include making quality education accessible to those unable to attend formal classes for any number of reasons. Online education is not the only solution. There are several very good open universities in the developing world that are leaders in taking knowledge to

learners through a variety of methods, including programmes that are supported at the village level by tutors or mentors. Many conventional universities have also now expanded to offer more flexibility. Perhaps all universities should become "dual-mode" institutions and, therefore, capabilities to become such must be encouraged and enhanced.

There are many older technologies made more exciting through new innovations, such as miniaturisation, solar energy and enhanced functionality, that can be applied without great cost, especially in non-formal education (e.g., suitcase-sized community radio stations). COL's work in the application of educational technologies is also helping to close the digital divide.

At the specific request of Commonwealth Education Ministers, COL is also working on the establishment of a virtual university system to serve the numerous small states of the Commonwealth. Such an initiative would certainly involve consortia of local institutions.

COL's current Three-year Plan includes four key roles for COL, all of which aim to improve locally accessible formal and non-formal education and facilitate the sharing of resources regionally and globally.

The first role, that of a catalyst for collaboration, seeks to marshal the wealth of experience, talent, and resources available for the Commonwealth's benefit. It pervades all of COL's actions. Collaboration is secured through COL's participation and/or initiation of regional and international fora to help build bridges amongst those governments, intergovernmental organisations, business, non-governmental organisations and professional bodies sharing a common purpose.

The second role, that of a resource for training, focuses on developing national capabilities in distance and open learning.

The third role, that of a capacity builder, is designed to assist countries to use distance and open learning to develop capacity in other areas. COL undertakes initiatives to demonstrate how the methodologies, techniques and practices of open and distance learning can be exploited to provide training, re-skilling and professional upgrading in fields such as teacher training, governance, human rights, health, management, agriculture, the environment and information and communications technologies.

The fourth role, that of an information/knowledge provider, has COL taking full advantage of modern communications tools to facilitate the collection and dissemination of knowledge about open and distance learning and its practical application. COL also continues to use conventional means of sharing such knowledge, information and advice to ensure that those not yet possessing reliable Internet and related services are included.

The Plan also outlines COL's efforts to diversify funding sources and increase the leveraging of core funding. Our fee-for-service affiliate, COL International, plays a major role in this strategy as it secures contracts to which it can bring the same level of professionalism and engagement as COL has traditionally brought to non-contractual work.

With Ministers of Education endorsing these directions at their meeting in Halifax, Canada, late last year, they expressed their confidence that COL's next decade of service to the Commonwealth will be even more effective than its first, permitting it to enable the Commonwealth to draw on the opportunities afforded by distance, open and technology-mediated learning to extend access to quality education, even to the remotest regions and the most disadvantaged populations (girls and women, marginalised males and those at the bottom of the social-economic ladder).

The Plan's implementation will position the Commonwealth to embrace flexible learning options to address formal educational needs as well as the expanding needs for non-formal education in areas such as literacy, numeracy, public health and hygiene, HIV/AIDS, life-long learning and labour market training, as well as the particular plight of children at risk: orphans, refugees and those living in the streets.