

# COL's Policy on Regional Centres and Regional Representation

## Background and assessment

COL 's core task is to help Commonwealth member governments take full advantage of open, distance and technology-mediated learning strategies. Because Commonwealth countries are spread around the world COL has tried in various ways to sustain closer day-to-day contact with Member Governments than is possible from Vancouver.

*Regional Advisors.* COL appointed regional advisors to gather information on local priorities and to ensure a presence at important meetings. Although there were occasional benefits this practice mostly proved ineffectual and the cost was high. Advisors were paid between \$10-20,000 per annum, were brought to headquarters for briefings and had all expenses paid for their COL work. For nine advisors the total cost of well over \$100,000 per annum was judged to be a poor investment.

*Regional Centre.* COL established and funded the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) as a regional centre to build capacity in educational media. CEMCA began with a media focus but has now expanded to embrace all technology-based learning while also serving to link open and distance learning (ODL) needs in any area with ODL competencies. It is intended as a resource for the region that can organise training activities, and provide expertise and resources in the area of ODL using its own staff and local experts.

CEMCA is hosted by India's national Open University (IGNOU) and is an autonomous body accorded international status by India. The original intention that it be financially self-sustaining proved unrealistic. Core funding for the centre is provided almost entirely by COL with the host university contributing office space. This model is too costly for COL to reproduce elsewhere.

*Centres of Expertise.* COL has helped build competencies and systems for ODL in existing institutions that then become, with the agreement of their Governments, centres of expertise in ODL for the region. This is the motivation for supporting both the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) and the Nigeria's National Open University (NOU). They are not asked to gather intelligence for COL or to represent it regionally. COL supports personnel

training and systems improvements while the host institution underwrites all staff and logistical costs.

COL works with the host institutions on plans to strengthen the competencies available through the centres and provides some funds (~ \$100,000 per year per centre) for these activities, but with no commitment beyond the first three years of operation. These funds cannot be used for salaries, capital equipment or rental costs but are earmarked almost entirely for training the local staff. An agreement with the host institution specifies the roles and responsibilities of the centre, including staffing and accommodation. COL must now develop a training plan for each Centre that goes beyond workshops to focus on the training of key people for the roles that they will play. COL will also need to provide guidance on the systems needed to underpin effective ODL.

*Secondment of individuals.* In one instance COL employs an individual on secondment to provide expertise and manage COL's work in a region. A staff member of The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand takes forward COL's work on technical/vocational education in the Pacific, represents COL at some meetings and gathers information. COL reimburses the institution for all salary, office and overhead costs. This arrangement works well. While the cost is not trivial, it has given COL a more sustained presence in the Pacific than it could have achieved from Vancouver alone.

## **Policy**

1. COL will not engage regional advisers simply to be a COL presence without programme functions.
2. COL will not create further regional centres where it would be responsible for all programming and staff costs. It will continue to support CEMCA, both because of its unique status in India and because of the logistical and programme help it can give in a country where COL is deeply engaged.
3. COL will follow through on its commitments to both BOCODOL and NOU while working towards agreement on a training plan to give the institutions the competencies required by their role. COL should envisage their status as eventual centres of expertise in ODL that can build regional competencies. They will not be referred to as 'COL regional centres'.
4. COL will help local institutions develop ODL expertise for wider use in their region. For the sake of transparency and fairness it will seek bids from institutions ready to make a multi-year commitment and judge them on a competitive basis on criteria such as: relevance to COL's Three-Year Plan; support of host country; capacity to raise additional financial support; readiness to build local capacity and innovate; commitment to helping local institutions; adequacy of institutional infrastructure and its maintenance.

5. COL will, if suitable conditions are met, arrange secondments of individual staff to COL from ODL institutions and give them a defined regional role in its programme.
6. COL may also offer some time-limited support to prominent local ODL experts, through their institutions, by designating them 'COL Experts', somewhat along the lines of the UNESCO Chairs. Details would be agreed on a case-by-case basis.

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