

# *COL in the Commonwealth: Promoting Learning for Development*

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*By Professor Asha Kanwar  
Commonwealth of Learning*

Colleagues,

It is a pleasure to be here at the 18<sup>th</sup> CCEM with the Chair of COL's Board of Governors, the Honourable Burchell Whiteman, a former Minister of Education of Jamaica. This is a very important meeting for the Commonwealth of Learning for two reasons: one, to present to you the work that COL does and two, to invite each of you to help us develop relevant and focused Action Plans for your country as we move to our next triennial Plan for 2012-15.

We have given you two documents.

The first is *COL in the Commonwealth: Country Reports 2009-2012*. The complete compendium of what COL has done in each of the 54 Member States is a very substantial document and for that reason, we have placed it on the bookshelf of the Android tablets that you have received.

We have given you a paper report relating only to your country. You will note that this includes summaries of pan-Commonwealth and regional work. After the 17<sup>th</sup> CCEM in Kuala Lumpur, we developed Action Plans for each country in consultation with the Focal Points in your ministries and other stakeholders. We then tracked the progress of these Action Plans over the last three years and the results are available as Country Reports. I hope you will be pleased by what has been accomplished in your country.

The second document called *Learning for Development is our Three Year Plan for 2012-15*, developed after wide consultation across the Commonwealth and approved by COL's Board of Governors. We shall request the Ministers to ratify this plan later this week. So what do we mean by learning for development? We mean that we are not simply promoting learning for the sake of learning, but learning that results in

the development of individuals, communities and nations so that they can lead productive and healthy lives.

The centerfold page of the Plan gives you a summary of what COL's aims and activities are and the targets it hopes to achieve within the framework of results-based management. COL's mission is to help governments and institutions to expand the scale, efficiency and quality of learning by using various technologies.

We have identified five strategies to achieve our objectives: leveraging partnerships, building capacity, and developing models, materials and policies. Partnerships are especially important to us: with institutions and organisations in your countries, and with other multilateral organisations such as UNESCO and COMSEC with whom we have developed joint work plans.

The Android tablet, funded by Hewlett and UNICEF with technical inputs by COL and COMSEC, is a nice example of such collaboration and partnerships. The tablet also demonstrates the future of learning. Technologies are evolving at a dizzying pace. COL believes in the appropriate use of technologies to increase access, improve quality and lower the costs of education. For us, technologies include everything from print which is still the mainstay of traditional distance learning to community media such as radio and TV as well as mobile and online learning systems.

Let me demonstrate this with our proposed strategic plan which covers two sectors: Education and Livelihoods and Health. Education focuses on the formal education sector while Livelihoods and Health caters to non-formal learning. We have narrowed the focus of our work to 7 initiatives and 2 cross-cutting themes.

The first initiative in the Education Sector is Open Schooling at the secondary level. Frances Ferreira, who came to COL after heading the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL), leads our work in this area.

Your success in achieving Education for All has created a surge of demand for secondary schooling that cannot be accommodated in existing schools. COL believes that open schools can offer quality learning opportunities to large numbers of students at about one fourth of the costs. This is possible through the use of Open and Distance Learning which uses a range of technologies from print to Web 2.0.

Through a six-country partnership, COL has developed 20 sets of course materials in print and online formats, based on the secondary curricula of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia. This has not only established communities of practice but has helped teachers and institutions save time and money by collaborating on the content development. COL will promote the development and use of Open Educational Resources or free materials for secondary curricula so that when you introduce computers in schools, you will have free quality content available and enhanced staff capacity.

Our second initiative is Teacher Education. Dr. Abdurrahman Umar, who was formerly the Academic Director of the National Teachers' Institute, Nigeria, the world's largest distance learning institution for teachers, is in charge of this area at COL.

In 2007, UNESCO suggested that 18 million additional teachers will be required globally if the UPE goals are to be achieved by 2015. Conventional teacher education methods cannot cope with the demand. Both pre-service and in-service teacher training through open and distance learning has a long history of cutting costs and raising both output and quality. This involves making use of a range of technologies for eLearning and Interactive Radio Instruction especially for nomadic and itinerant communities.

Third, we support Higher Education, with a particular focus on professional education, quality assurance and the use of ICTs. Dr. Madhulika Kaushik, a former professor at the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, is our Higher Education Specialist. COL will work with you to align its Higher Education initiative to the priorities of your countries.

Access continues to remain a challenge with APRs less than 10% in many Commonwealth countries. A number of Commonwealth countries are establishing open universities with the latest being the Mauritius Open University which came into existence only last month. COL will provide the technical advice necessary to develop the IT systems, build staff capacity and provide free course materials which have already been developed by COL.

COL has developed a COL Review and Improvement Model (COLRIM), which helps both ODL and campus universities to assess their respective practices for external accreditation and continuous self-improvement. It is a simple five-step process which can be undertaken by any institution. COL will continue to focus on improving the quality of higher education.

Fourth, we are supporting the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, an idea that was conceived by Ministers at the 14<sup>th</sup> CCEM in Halifax. It is not a new university but a collaborative network of institutions to strengthen tertiary education in the small states. John Lesperance from the Ministry of Education of Seychelles is leading this initiative, which now has a respectable repertoire of courses and a Transnational Qualifications Framework.

All 32 small states are on board and they have collaboratively developed several skills-based eLearning materials which are freely available as Open Education Resources on the COL website and are on offer in six countries. COL's emphasis will now be on the adoption and delivery of VUSSC programmes at scale through online technologies and sharing of free content.

The second sector of COL's work Livelihoods and Health makes an equally important contribution to learning for development. As you try and tackle the issue of youth unemployment, COL helps ministries and institutions use open and distance learning approaches to increase access to skills development. Leading our work in this area is Alison Mead Richardson from the UK.

Face-to-face skills training can cost up to 14 times more than distance learning approaches. Seven African institutions are offering new open and distance learning courses that have substantially increased enrolments. COL is using video programmes to demonstrate practicals but as technology becomes more affordable, haptic devices will provide a real option for quality skills training.

More than 500 million members of the rural workforce in agriculture have limited access to training opportunities. The Lifelong Learning for Farmers initiative has increased the rural prosperity of farmers

not just in India and Sri Lanka but also in Kenya, Uganda and is now extending to Jamaica and Papua New Guinea. Leading this is Dr. Balasubramanian, a very experienced development specialist from India.

Farmers learn from experts using basic mobile phones in their own language. COL has developed a computer-mobile interface to scale up the learning. This is a model that can be replicated in different jurisdictions and we will be happy to demonstrate this at our booth during this conference.

COL helps you use community media, which has had a second coming, to improve the health of individuals and communities through effective health messages and distance learning programmes developed by and for the communities themselves. This is led by my Canadian colleague Ian Pringle.

One such activity for Mother and Child Health has been implemented in Malawi and resulted in a change in health-seeking behaviours among the community. The use of media for community health will be expanded over the next triennium.

Colleagues, as you can see, we have seven initiatives that address key learning and development challenges in the Commonwealth. This requires that we contribute not just to the development of the formal education sector alone but strengthen non-formal education to cover the entire spectrum of lifelong learning.

In addition, eLearning and gender will be the crosscutting themes since they underpin everything we do.

We get many requests for help in introducing eLearning from many Commonwealth countries. Our work in this area will be led by Dr. Mark Bullen, a distinguished Canadian academic.

In the previous three years, our South African colleague, Trudi van Wyk, has worked in partnership with COMSEC and Microsoft in the Caribbean to integrate ICT for teacher training, benefitting thousands of teachers.

COL recognises that the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment are central to its agenda of learning for development. COL will continue to harness the potential of open, distance and technology-mediated learning to expand access to quality education and training for girls/women in both the formal and non-formal learning sectors.

Finally, COL's team in Vancouver is assisted by our unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia or CEMCA. Under the leadership of its Director, Dr. Sanjaya Mishra, who has recently joined us from UNESCO, Paris, CEMCA will work to achieve the outcomes of COL's programme. CEMCA's expertise in low-cost technologies and models will serve to enhance COL's impact in the region.

In the previous three years, under the leadership of Dr. Sreedher, CEMCA became a nodal agency for the development of community radio in the region.

That, Colleagues is COL's programme. The focus on girls education, skills development and the use of OERs will permeate all the initiatives that I have just described.

To give you an example of our work in OER, let me highlight the recent project on ‘Fostering Governmental Awareness Internationally’ in which COL worked with UNESCO.

This was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and led by our former President Sir John Daniel.

The World OER Congress was held in Paris during June 20-22 at the UNESCO HQs in Paris. The aim was to encourage governments to promote the use of OER and open licenses.

This resulted in the Paris Declaration which makes 10 recommendations. Three of these directly relevant to you are:

- Facilitate enabling environments for use of ICTs;
- Reinforce the development of policies on OER; and
- Encourage the open licensing of educational materials produced with public funds.

You now know what areas COL is active in. Please choose what fits in with your country priorities and we will develop Action Plans to suit your specific needs, within the limits of our modest resources.

Let me end by expressing double thanks. First, thank you for appointing Focal Points to liaise with COL. We have Focal Points in all your countries and they are very helpful in keeping regular channels of communication open between COL and your ministries. They will play a key role in converting this strategic plan into Country Action Plans.

Second, we really appreciate the voluntary contributions that you make to our budget. More than three fourths of Commonwealth countries now support COL. We consider this support an important indicator that we are doing something useful for you.

COL is your organisation and it works for you. It is small and flexible and can respond readily to your needs. COL is a world class source of expertise in open, distance and technology-based approaches and in these times of economic difficulty, these approaches will become more important than ever before. Your support will be critical in making this happen.

Thank you for your attention.