COL's submission to the Commonwealth's High Level Review Group

ENHANCING ACCESS TO LEARNING AND TRAINING: A SUBMISSION TO THE COMMONWEALTH'S HIGH-LEVEL REVIEW GROUP*

*A group of 10 Heads of Government are reviewing the Commonwealth with a view to making it stronger and more relevant to current needs. The group, known as the High Level Review Group (HLRG), was formed during the 1999 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in South Africa to come up with ways of enabling the Commonwealth to address existing and new challenges.

Members of the HLRG are:

H.E. Thabo Mbeki, President of South Africa (Chair)
The Hon. John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia
The Hon. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prime Minister of India
The Hon. Dr. Edward Fenech-Adami, Prime Minister of Malta
The Rt. Hon. Sir Mekere Morauta, Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea
The Hon. Mr. Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister of Singapore
H.E. Benjamin Mkapa, President of Tanzania
The Hon. Basdeo Panday, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago
The Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
H.E. Robert Mugabe, President of Zimbabwe

The group will report to the October 2001 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Brisbane, Australia.

HLRG requested a submission from The Commonwealth of Learning, which was prepared with contributions from several eminent persons. The submission which follows was endorsed by COL’s Board of Governors and Commonwealth Ministers of Education when they met in Halifax in November 2000.

The Commonwealth of Learning acknowledges the contribution of the following eminent persons in the preparation of this submission:

Dr. (Ms.) Armaity Desai,
former Chair of the University Grant Commission, India

Dr. (Mme.) Huguette Labelle, O.C.,
former President of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Canada
Access to education means access to a better future

Recognising knowledge as key to cultural, social and economic development, The Commonwealth of Learning is committed to assisting Commonwealth member governments:

- to take full advantage of open, distance and technology-mediated learning strategies; and
- to provide increased and equitable access to education and training for all their citizens.

-- COL Mission Statement

1. Education: An investment in people and a Commonwealth priority

Heads of Governments created the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in 1987 to help them exploit open, distance, and technology-mediated learning to meet the education and training requirements of all their peoples. An investment in education and training is an investment in people - a nation's most important asset. It is the means to empower them to shape their own destiny, respond to the social, economic and personal challenges of the global village, and contribute to their countries' development. How the Commonwealth nurtures this human capital will largely determine whether citizens in the new century will succeed or merely survive, have equal access to opportunities and equity or be obliged to acquiesce to disparity, enjoy wealth or be doomed to poverty, maintain wellness or suffer misery.

2. Commonwealth performance and challenges

- Out-of-school children
- Illiteracy
- Low participation rates
Lack of lifelong learning

Retraining needs

HIV/AIDS

Increased access essential to sustainability

Entering the 21st century, the Commonwealth is home to the world's largest proportion of out-of-school children (some 135 million), illiterates (990 million young people and adults), untrained and under-trained teachers (in excess of 15 - 20 million), and the lowest rates of participation in post-secondary education (under 3% of the age cohort). Commonwealth citizens are uncertain if they will be offered life-long learning, training and retraining, vital to their economic and social well being. HIV/AIDS is decimating skilled labour and professional classes, aggravating further an already tenuous situation. Significantly increased access to education and training is essential to sustain even the minimum development gains of the last ten years.

3. Scarc resources impose

Need to re-engineer education sectors

Need to adopt ODL

Countries will be positioned to teach 21st Century skills

Frame a problem

Communicate

Form coalitions

Learn to learn

Scarce talent and financial resources necessitate a re-engineering of education sectors, including the adoption of open, distance and technology-mediated learning capable of providing services quickly, flexibly, comprehensively, and economically so that countries can meet burgeoning demand and ensure the vitality of their democracies, the strength of their economies and the dignity and well-being of their peoples. These initiatives would help educate citizens for the 21st Century, a century that will place a premium on skills like: the ability to frame problems when facing unfamiliar situations, in recognition that the ability to frame a problem is central to its resolution; the ability to communicate, especially with people from other cultures, in recognition that without certain common values and shared insights, political and social life becomes impossible, and conflict and human waste on a grand scale result; the ability to work in, form and lead teams and coalitions, in recognition that as interdependence increases, collaboration will become even more universally important; and the ability to identify what needs to be learned, and then efficiently learn it.

4. Pressing needs on all fronts
Growing youth populations

Transformations in work environments

Re-skilling needs

Professional upgrading

Address multiple purposes

The priority is more pressing for a Commonwealth composed mostly of the young and those in the economically productive age bracket. Their social and work environments will see massive transformations in the wake of technological change necessitating the rapid development of new skills accompanied by strategies for retraining or re-skilling labour. Education and training must be designed to serve multiple purposes from up-skilling illiterate or semi-literate agricultural workers facing the implications of biotechnology to upgrading health professionals confronting parallel developments in medical technologies. The Commonwealth can employ COL to address these needs and with them questions of equity, access, quality, the costing of education and the appropriateness of delivery mechanisms.

5. The Commonwealth's response: The Commonwealth of Learning

• A catalyst for change,

• An information provider

• A training agent

• A model builder

COL's record of achievement for the Commonwealth:

• $45m project support

• 600 projects

• Support for open universities

• Addressing all levels of education

• 1200 trained

• Repository of knowledge in open learning

COL was created as a stand alone, autonomous agency, funded on a voluntary basis, in response to concerns about "supply" in the higher education sector although it increasingly responds to needs in all sectors of education and training. Its mission: to provide know-how and insights on the then little known practice of open and distance learning by providing leading-edge information, knowledge, training, networking, and model building. On the Commonwealth's behalf, it has delivered about 600 projects.
valued at about $45 million. These projects have influenced the creation or enhanced capacities of open universities in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, as well as the Universities of the West Indies and South Pacific. COL has also assisted staff development, training, policy formulation, collaborative materials development, technology applications, knowledge sharing and the implementation of student support systems

- In non-formal education
- In basic and post basic education
- In teacher training
- In continuing technical and professional education
- In skills for development or technical/vocational education
- In higher education

It has trained some 1,200 individuals and employed around 400 short-term consultants from 39 Commonwealth countries, in the course of which, it has become the centre of a Commonwealth wide network of knowledge and skills in open learning.

6. COL: global source of knowledge and experience

Not only is it a Commonwealth asset, but also a global repository of experience and knowledge in distance education,

- Its effective use in diverse situations,
- Its ability to reach a variety of clientele (girls and women, marginalised males, rural and remote populations, and those at the bottom end of the socio-economic ladder), and
- Its capacity to address key issues like HIV/AIDS with its associated health, social and economic impacts.

COL has contributed to activities of the World Bank, regional development banks, UN and other agencies. The Commonwealth can take just pride in its work and did so in the report of A Progress Review (1993) which determined that "COL has succeeded ...in delivering services which are valued by clients across the Commonwealth. COL has become progressively capable of meeting the increasing expectations of clients and should be encouraged to do so."

7. COL’s resourcing

- Voluntary contributions
- Leveraging
- Diversification of funding
. Creation of COL International

Governments’ confidence in COL is demonstrated by their continuing voluntary contributions, supplemented by support for discrete projects to address key issues. COL leverages this funding with at least two dollars of programming generated for each dollar of program expenditure. It has diversified funding sources through licensing agreements and contracts, the latter to increase through the creation of COL International, a not-for-profit affiliate, able to bid on contracts from development agencies and international financial institutions.

8. Meeting challenges of globalisation

Education and training will need to respond to profound changes spearheaded by globalisation: Pressures to cede sovereign national powers to multi-national groupings or to multilateral organisations like the WTO continue to increase. Simultaneously, previously centralised powers related to education may also be devolved to others, affecting areas related to quality standards, accreditation, financing and governance. Its unique experience in dealing with these issues positions COL to help government agencies and institutions navigate these changes by:

• Showing how they can utilise open learning to retool their own staffs;
• Acquainting them with lessons learned in areas of credit recognition and the portability of diplomas and qualifications;
• Helping education leaders manage change;
• Identifying ways to modify the regulatory/policy environment governing education and training so that its financing and institutional governance can incorporate innovative and cost effective solutions; and
• Helping to increase technological literacy, including its use to improve the management and delivery of education.

COL could go further by assisting the formation of consortia of Commonwealth higher education institutions so that the Commonwealth education space continues to offer curricula developed locally in contrast to that provided by external on-line providers. Likewise, it could respond more positively to requests by institutions to provide certification of programmes developed jointly and even to award joint degrees in order to enhance both the prestige of programs and mobility within the Commonwealth. While such steps would be in keeping with the bold vision that inspired COL’s creation, COL will continue to defer to Governments' wishes in this respect.

9. Menu of support to governments, their institutions, and individuals

Shortages of trained people, knowledge products and modern appliances hinder Commonwealth countries’ ability to exploit emerging opportunities. COL adds value in all aspects of this challenge by capitalising on its experience and knowledge. It has kept pace with phenomenal developments in learning technologies and has helped Commonwealth academics and individuals access the opportunities they afford through:
• Publications, seminars, workshops, conferences, and web pages,

• The use of low cost communications tools to speed responses to queries from all of the
  Commonwealth,

• The development of Commonwealth-wide degree programs enriching the affordable range of
  education options,

• Helping institutions create their own Internet sites,

• Establishing community radio stations to serve education and information needs of remote and
  rural populations,

• The development of courses and evaluation of products, and

• The encouragement of professional and institutional networks at the regional and pan-
  Commonwealth level.

Together these initiatives help countries meet the daunting challenge of educating all Commonwealth
citizens for the 21st Century.

10. The way ahead: Mission necessary and achievable

Commonwealth Governments set up COL in response to concerns about education and training. COL has
proved its capacity to innovate and change directions quickly in the fulfilment of its original mission: to
help extend access to education and training to all Commonwealth peoples by exploiting open, distance,
and technology-mediated learning. Transformations to the environment in which education and training
must be delivered, rather than inhibit COL’s role, can empower and enable it to bring greater purpose to
its mission. By partnering with government, non-government and private enterprise, and drawing on the
Commonwealth's unique tradition of sharing knowledge, experience and skills, that mission becomes
achievable. Rapid continuous change and the challenges of the 21st Century make it necessary.