

Promoting Learning for Development



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Transcript

It gives me great pleasure to be at MFAT and I thank you for the opportunity to present the Commonwealth of Learning and its work.

COL is an intergovernmental organisation, established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver in 1987. We believe that access to learning is the key to development. We are very grateful to the Government of New Zealand for its continued financial and intellectual support.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of distance education and technologies for expanding access to education and training.

We believe that giving people the opportunity to learn helps accelerate progress towards achieving the international development goals and the Commonwealth values of peace, equality, democracy and good governance.

As the deadline of 2015 for achieving these international goals approaches, we find that 8 Commonwealth countries in the Pacific are still off track to achieve at least one of the goals. One country will not achieve at least five of the eight goals.

In addition to placing our work within the context of internationally agreed development goals, we have a strong country focus and tailor our programme to suit the needs of Member States. We have an active network of Focal Points, nominated by Ministers of Education in 52 countries and this network identifies the priorities that COL can address. The Focal Points for the Pacific believed that COL should make TVET materials available; bring best practice to the region, provide technical advice in ODL and OER.

As a result of the wide consultations in all the four regions of the Commonwealth, COL developed a strategic plan for 2012-15. COL hopes to contribute to a substantial increase in the number of Commonwealth citizens who will acquire the knowledge and skills to lead healthy and productive lives. You will note the shift from developing the capacity in 'knowledge and skills' to the capability that Commonwealth citizens will have to 'lead productive and healthy lives'.

The strategic goals for this triennium include:

- Quality education
- Human resource development
- Harnessing ODL and technology for social and economic development

Based on the needs identified, the priority for COL includes education for girls and women, promoting the use of open education resources or OER and skills development.

COL organises its work in two sectors: education and livelihoods & health. These two sectors have seven initiatives and two cross-cutting themes. COL has identified five core strategies to implement its work: partnerships, capacity, materials, models and policies. As a small organisation, each of these strategies helps us to leverage our impact.

COL's cross-cutting themes of eLearning and Gender underpin all our work. Let me give you examples of each of these initiatives at the global level and in the Pacific region.

As countries achieve success in providing universal primary education, there are still significant barriers preventing many young people from entering secondary education - worldwide - 71 million adolescents are not in school. COL works in 26 countries in expanding open schooling to increase learning opportunities for secondary education, particularly for girls, out-of-school youth, and people in remote regions.

In the Pacific, COL initiated its open schooling work by commissioning a 12 country report to identify the need for open schools. As a result, USP has established open schools in Tonga (50), Kiribati (70) and the Solomon Islands (58). Open Access College, Adelaide is poised to start a twinning arrangement with Vanuatu Open School. The 22-country consortium of the Commonwealth Open Schools Association has six members from the region which include New Zealand and Australia, an example of a pan-Commonwealth connection.

One of the key obstacles to achieving UPE is the shortfall in teacher supply in most developing countries. 1.7 million additional teachers will be needed if we are to achieve UPE by 2015! It will not be possible to rely on only brick and mortar approaches to address the projected shortfalls in teacher supply. Therefore COL provides support to teacher training institutions to strengthen and expand their programmes through the use of ODL and technology. In the last three years, COL collaborated with these institutions to train over 350,000 teachers in 24 countries.

COL's work in teacher education in the Pacific has been related to building capacity in Quality Assurance, Curriculum Development and MultiGrade teacher training.

Many Commonwealth countries in Asia and Africa are trying to improve the APRs in Higher Education. COL is using distance learning approaches to help achieve this. Just to take one example COL pioneered the development of a Commonwealth executive MBA and MPA programme which enabled our partner institutions to increase the numbers of trained managers and administrators in their countries. COL's work in HE includes leadership training and institutional quality assessment.

In the Pacific, COL's Legislative Drafting programme is offered through the Vanuatu campus of USP.

Commonwealth Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for the small states, a network of 32 countries. Seven institutions, covering all Commonwealth regions are now offering VUSSC developed courses. As a result of ongoing training programmes, we have built the capacity of more than 11,000 people including educators, policy makers and IT managers. We have also developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework to promote learners' mobility and credit transfer between countries and regions.

The first cohort of students of the sustainable agriculture course has graduated from the University of Samoa under the VUSSC arrangement and the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA) is very much part of the collaboration on a common Transnational Qualifications Framework.

COL's work in skills development builds the capacity of institutions to offer new, flexible courses for people working in the informal sector, especially women. COL has developed 5 courses in Basic Trades and in Vocational literacy and these are being used in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, PNG, Tuvalu and Nauru, training over 200 people in 2011.

Working with the Ministry of Education, COL supported a training programme on working with concrete. Today Nauru has 167 young people qualified to work with concrete as a result of this training.

Millions of farm families do not have access to learning in the developing countries. The present agricultural extension system based on face-to-face training is inadequate to address the challenges. COL offers a new approach called Lifelong Learning for Farmers, or L3F. It mobilises and organises the farmers and links them with banks for financial capital.

Here are the participants of a recently initiated L3F programme in PNG. COL catalyses the links between the civil society, institutions and micro-finance institutions to develop multi-media based learning. Such a linkage in which every agricultural borrower is a learner has led to vibrant entrepreneurial behaviours among the poorer and marginalised communities. This model, which was first successful in India and Sri Lanka, is now spreading to PNG, a nice example of an Asia-Pacific connection.

The Healthy Communities initiative, helps local organisations to create non-formal educational programmes about community health and development. These photographs are of a learning programme called the Bag of Life in a district of Malawi with extremely high rates of maternal and child mortality. The programme is a collaborative venture between a community network of some 15,000 women, a local health NGO, the district hospital and a community radio. In perhaps the most powerful illustration of the value of the Bag of Life, over 150 women's groups representing over 2,000 women contribute their own money to keep this programme going.

A similar programme is on offer in the Solomon Islands. Building on consistent advocacy and capacity building, the Isabel Province Government has recently accepted the proposal to support technology mediated learning through the Isabel Learning Network, comprising 8 village based communication centres including radio and email stations.

Our work in elearning cuts across all initiatives. One global success in this area was the 2012 World OER Congress organised in partnership with UNESCO, Paris and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. We believe that OER have the potential to transform the way we teach and learn. Many in the developing world are benefiting from the use of free materials and affordable textbooks. The Paris Declaration captures the global agenda for action by making ten recommendations that relate to advocacy, capacity development, policy and research, areas that COL is active in. The COL website has a comprehensive set of resources, all in one place, that any policy-maker or practitioner can use, adopt or adapt.

In the Pacific, we have established a Chair in OER at Otago Polytechnic that is occupied by Dr Wayne Macintosh. We have an agreement with the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand to offer their Certificate in elearning to stakeholders in Africa and the Pacific.

COL tries to use technology to close the digital divide. Let me give you one example of a technology innovation that we are currently working on. The scene in this slide may be a typical learning situation for many children in developing countries. Classes such as these are far from electric power grids. Internet access is not even thought of as a possibility. Would tech-supported or e-learning mean anything in circumstances like this? (source of image:<http://www.flickr.com/photos/69583224@N05/8022556671/> -- CC BY SA)

Our answer is yes. The sudden rise of affordable Tablet computers has made it possible to connect learners even in remote areas to experience the power and advantages of connected learning.

Today, there is enough computing power in Tablets to make them function as servers. They can run a Learning Management System such as Moodle. Learners can access materials in the server using hand-held tablets.

In the picture here, the white device serves as power source and WiFi hot spot for the black device which is actually a PC. Together these two devices cost just under \$100 and form the core of what COL calls “Classroom Without Walls”

Gender is another crosscutting theme that underpins COL’s work. Leymah Gwobee, the Nobel laureate from Liberia said that one way to stop the violence against women is to put more women in power.

Women hold just 20% of the parliamentary seats across the Commonwealth. In the Pacific, the figure drops to a mere 5 %. COL is in the process of discussing how to develop a multi-media leadership course for women parliamentarians in the region. This could then be adapted for other Commonwealth regions.

So what are some of the lessons that we have learned?

That success depends substantially on partner buy-in from the very outset. It is important to embed COL’s activities in national and institutional plans and that because policy development often takes years to accomplish, COL must be patient and persevere. Policy advocacy must be based on concrete evidence and rigorous analysis. If we want models to go beyond the pilot phase, there must be an appropriate threshold level beyond which replication can be promoted.

Today COL is well respected across the Commonwealth. What constitutes our success? Let me highlight four key factors.

One, we have a strong country focus and we develop an Action Plan for each country, track progress and present triennial country reports to Ministers of Education of what we have done in each country.

Two, we are results-oriented and apply Results Based Management to all our work in order to provide evidence of our outcomes and impact. This has resulted in the doubling of the number of countries that make voluntary contributions to our budget. For instance, in 2006, we had 22 countries contributing while now the number has doubled to 44. There are many countries that make very small contributions, but each contribution, however small, is a measure of confidence in COL.

Three, a small organisation like COL must always earn its place at the table. One way of doing this is to be a recognised thought leader in learning for development. We have extended the frontiers of open and distance learning from academia to the field of development. We are acknowledged leaders in OER and we try and develop innovative models using appropriate technologies.

Four, COL demonstrates value for money. By keeping our organisation small, we are able to invest the major part of our budget on the programme work in the field. In addition, we leverage our impact through partnerships with public, private and civil society organisations. Furthermore, we develop models which can be replicated in different contexts, which help us to scale up, reach out and achieve more with less!

In short, COL is a highly focused, results-oriented organisation that has reinvented itself over the years to respond to the needs of its stakeholders. With that let me thank you for your kind attention

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Policy advocacy must be based on concrete evidence and rigorous analysis. If we want models to go beyond the pilot phase, there must be an appropriate threshold level beyond which replication can be promoted. Often civil society organisations and private entities which are flexible and have a holistic approach can be more suitable partners in learning for development.

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One, we have a strong country focus and we tailor our programme to suit the needs of Member States. We have an active network of Focal Points, nominated by Ministers of Education in 52 countries and this network not only receives triennial reports of what we have done in each country but also identifies the priorities that COL can address.

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Three, a small organisation like COL must always earn its place at the table. One way of doing this is to be a recognised thought leader in learning for development. We have extended the frontiers of open and distance learning from academia to the field of development. We are acknowledged leaders in the OER space and organised the World OER Congress last year in collaboration with UNESCO and support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Finally, we try and develop innovative models using technology.

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