

Remarks to the 14th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers



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by

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Your Excellencies, Senior Officials, Other Members of Delegations, The Chair

Our mandate, mission and purpose is to promote the use of distance, open and technology-mediated learning in Commonwealth countries

I last had an opportunity to make a presentation on behalf of The Commonwealth of Learning in Botswana in 1997 at the 13th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers. At that meeting, I presented to Ministers, our Three-Year Plan for the period 1997-2000 seeking their endorsement; I also requested that Ministers consider resourcing us on a three-year funding cycle through a three-tier financing arrangement. All of us at COL were most grateful by the warmth of your acceptance to those proposals in Botswana and at the same time the encouragement you gave my colleagues and I to pursue that Three-Year Plan with vigour. It therefore gives me enormous pleasure to be here to report to you on the past three years, as I promised I would. As is also expected of us, we are taking the opportunity of sharing with you and seeking your endorsement once again for the strategic directions we are planning to embark on for the next three (2000-2003). In tabling the latter, I am mindful that there is a High Level Group of the Commonwealth considering the future direction of the Commonwealth. COL, along with other agencies of the Commonwealth, has been invited to make a submission of its role in and for the Commonwealth in the 21st century. As your instrument for adding value to your own plans of enhancing access to quality learning in your countries, we thought it important that the submission we propose to make must be seen by you and have your agreement before transmittal to the High Level Group.

I therefore take pleasure in tabling for your consideration, three documents that will deal with each one of the three items separately. The first document [CCEM(00)(COL)2] is our report of the last three years (1997-2000); the second document [CCEM(00)(COL)3] contains the strategic direction that we are proposing for the next three years (2000-2003) and the third document [CCEM(00)(COL)4] is our submission to the High Level Group.

The last three years have been very productive years at COL. I am pleased to say that with the help of individuals, institutions and member governments, we were able to deliver almost all of the undertakings we said we would in Botswana. In 1997, we set out to add value and enrich the capacity of Commonwealth nations in the application of distance and open learning. Through formal and informal training, workshops, seminars, networking, model building, collaborative materials development, facilitating co-operation, research, publications - both on the web and paper, we completed 159 projects at a total cost of about C\$29 million. I am pleased to inform you that the resources to deliver the projects came in a variety of forms. Thirty five of the 54 Commonwealth countries made cash (around C\$16 million) and in-kind contributions, a further 10 made in-kind contributions. Only nine (9) member states did not make any contributions. We hope we can convince these nine nations to be our partners in the coming years.

In the report (in front of you) we have described our work and performance in brief. With your indulgence, let me highlight a few examples that demonstrate a variety of ways in which distance and open learning can be effectively applied in member states with the support of COL and its partners:

- Developing a model for secondary school education in Mozambique for out-of-school children working together with colleagues from Ministry of Education (initially being targeted at 1,000 children during this pilot but with the potential of reaching one million children in time to come).
- Developing training materials for teacher trainers in Southern Africa. (6.8 courses were created utilising indigenous talent from 7 southern African countries; in the process close to 340 teacher trainers received hands-on training in developing distance education materials in Science, Mathematics and Technology).
- Developing and delivering a training programme on entrepreneurship for rural women in Bangladesh (120 women successfully completed this training some three months ago).
- Developing a model for the application of ICTs in literacy work in India and Zambia. (While the global discussion continues on the digital divide, colleagues from India and Zambia are working in developing models to apply ICTs for literacy purposes. In Zambia, this pilot programme will reach 200,000 adults).
- Training farming and fishing communities in the Caribbean and Ghana using video technology. (At the grass roots level, the community is being empowered to teach itself skills to increase their economic production).
- Researching gender imbalances in technology use.

- Creating schoolnet facilities with private partners in India and many more. (This is our first attempt at working with a private provider with a social conscience to extend the reach of the Internet to enrich school curriculum).
- Putting in place a Canada Caribbean Distance Education Scholarship Programme to upgrade skills of working adults in the information technology and hospitality industries and teaching provisions. (60 Caribbean students are benefiting from this innovative use of scholarship money provided by the Government of Canada and three Canadian universities are partnering with us in this effort).
- Training distance educators both in informal settings and formal arrangements (with the support of the Government of India and their national open university, some 60 staff from 18 Commonwealth countries completed their studies for a masters degree in distance education).
- Training of junior surgeons in Sri Lanka for their post-graduate qualification by using training videos prepared by the Royal College of Surgeons.

My purpose in highlighting these is simply to showcase to you how distance and technology-mediated education can play a key role as an educational provision. The Commonwealth is probably the world's richest source of knowledge in distance education and COL is determined to tap this source for the benefit of Commonwealth member countries. Our report also describes the role we play in gathering and distributing knowledge and information on distance education; the role we play in training and in introducing new technologies to colleagues around the Commonwealth and perhaps, most importantly, in bringing about Commonwealth talent together to share and exchange knowledge. This last activity was demonstrated so clearly when, with the generous support of the Royal Kingdom of Brunei, between 3 to 400 Commonwealth colleagues gathered in Bandar Seri Begawan to celebrate the first decade of COL via the first Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. The experience was considered so enriching that those gathered have decided to create such an event periodically and the second PCF is now scheduled to take place in South Africa in 2002.

Your Excellencies, all of these could not have happened but for the generosity of your governments in welcoming our work and sustaining the agency's health by your words of encouragement and contributions of resources. I wish to thank the 44 Governments who provided support in either cash, kind or both. I would especially like to record our gratitude to our five (5) major donors of cash contribution, i.e., the Governments of Canada and the Province of British Columbia, who have been such warm and supportive friends; DFID of the UK who challenged us and urged us to think big and far; India for their consistent provision, Australia and New Zealand who continue to maintain a keen interest in our work.

The document [CCEM (00) (COL)3] describes the direction we propose to take for the next three years. This new plan is a result of the extensive consultations from all stakeholders (across the Commonwealth) over the last 18 months. Many of your officials would have received our first and second drafts during that period. It is clear from these consultations, that distance, open and technology-mediated learning has evolved into the fastest growing sector in education right across the globe, covering every segment of education and training, from non-formal, literacy and basic education to skills training and post-graduate work. Part of the reason for this growth can be attributed to the pervasiveness of ICTs covering many

aspects of our lives, and another part of the reason has to do with the continuing gap between demand and supply of educational services. This view is reflected globally. Time and time again, we are reminded of the 113 or 135 million children who do not have an access to learning, the 800-900 million adults who are blind to the written word and the 93-97% of young adults who have the qualifications to enter post-secondary education but could not find the necessary provision.

Given this need/demand and the opportunity to apply distance education solutions, Commonwealth institutions still seek from us, information knowledge, skills, training, models, networks, access to technology and knowledge products. The plan we are presenting to Ministers of Education therefore captures these needs in four (4) strategic ways, viz.:

- Catalytic in building collaborations (UNESCO, UNHCR, WHO, CBU, ADB, UNICEF, UNIFEM, WB, AfDB)
- Trainer
- Capacity building by using distance education in human development
- Information and knowledge provider

On an annual basis, these strategic goals will manifest as projects on an institutional, national, regional or Pan-Commonwealth basis.

In Durban, we made a plea for and received the endorsement of Heads of Governments to increase our annual budget to Cdn\$9.0 (cash) to underpin the plans of the triennium. I am now pleased to say that early indications from many Commonwealth Governments are positive. In their response to an appeal from the Secretary-General and us, the Governments of New Zealand, Dominica, Kenya, Barbados, Zimbabwe and Australia have significantly increased their voluntary support and other major donors are giving us a hearing. Given the nature of our work, the need for our services and the performance of the agency, I am optimistic that this ministerial meeting will find the means to meet the targets warmly supported by the Heads of Governments. Already in the pipeline are a grant of US\$0.25 million from the World Bank for the strengthening of a Global Information and Knowledge Network, the promise of a multi-million dollar grant to establish community-based radio broadcasting stations to support education for all, health, skills development, education and a possible multi-year support for skills development in the South Pacific region.

The third document [CCEM (00) (COL)4] we are tabling this morning is to seek your views and endorsement of a submission we are planning to make to the High Level Group, which is revisiting a role for the Commonwealth in the 21st century. This review is expected to have some far-reaching impact in the way the Commonwealth conducts its business. Twelve years ago, Heads of Governments demonstrated amazing foresight in creating The Commonwealth of Learning to serve a particular purpose. From all of the studies, evaluations and reviews done on the agency, it is clear that COL has found an important niche for itself as a technical support agency for member states. By doing its work, it has enabled Commonwealth Governments and their institutions to keep abreast of shifts in the delivery of

education especially in the context of globalisation and the new technological environment. The new technologies allow us, today, to recreate the magic of great classrooms and teachers anywhere in the world at any time. This applies equally to basic education and skills development, to post-secondary studies and training and continuing professional development. Our proposed submission to the High Level Group argues a case for the use of open, distance and technology-mediated delivery of education and training; echoing the addresses of Honourable Ministers that education, training, knowledge and skills are the foundation stones of all attempts at poverty alleviation, better health, environment, participation in democratic processes and the observance of transparent and good governance. The challenge in terms of sheer numbers is of such a magnitude that the use of open and distance learning is an imperative. This makes COL an asset of the Commonwealth of the 21st century. We like to have your endorsement of our submission which has been put together with the help of six (6) eminent Commonwealth persons such as: Professor Armaity Desai, Professor Malcolm Skilbeck, Professor Teboho Moja, Sir Humphrey Maud, Mme Huguette Labelle, The Honourable Burchell Whiteman and Dr. H. Ian Macdonald.

During a recent visit to our office in Vancouver, a High Commissioner of a Commonwealth country said of COL: "It is small, effective and efficient." We are proud to have received this accolade, and perhaps add 'responsive' to the list, as we look to the next three years of service to the Commonwealth. Your support will be invaluable to our endeavour.

To summarise:

- We invite you to receive our reports, and thank you for the privilege of working with colleagues in your country.
- We seek your approval of our three-year strategic direction and that you indicate your support for it.
- We seek your agreement in taking our submission to the High Level Group.

Thank you.