NOTES ON THE STAFF/BOARD RETREAT:
PLANNING FOR 2015-2018
Post-Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)
Board Discussion
THURSDAY, 13 JUNE 2013 – 13:30-16:30
COAL HARBOUR SUITE, PAN PACIFIC HOTEL

PRESENT

COL Staff	Board of Governors
Professor Asha Kanwar, President	The Honourable Burchell Whiteman
Mr. Vis Naidoo, VP	Dr. Linda Sissons, CNZM
Dr. Venkataraman Balaji	Mr. Ashok Thakur
Ms. Doris McEachern	HE Mrs. Mariam Yalwaji Katagum
Dr. Kodhandaraman Balasubramanian	Professor Narend Baijnath
Ms. Frances Ferreira	Professor Akilagpa Sawyerr
Dr. Madhulika Kaushik	Professor Dr. Atta-Ur-Rahman, FRS
Mr. John Lesperance	Professor Clement Sankat
Ms. Alison Mead Richardson	The Honourable Dr. Dame Carol Kidu
Mr. Ian Pringle	Professor John Wood
Dr. Abdurrahman Umar	Mr. Martin G. Bean
Dr. Mark Bullen	Ms. Mia Mouelhi
Ms. Rosanne Wong	Ms. Anfal Saqib
Ms. Angela Kwan	Ms. Nicola Watt
Mr. Dave Wilson	
	Guest
Ms. Anna Lee	Mr. David Geyer, AusAID

Note-taker
Ms. Lydia Meister

The retreat started later than planned, at 14:00.

The Honourable Burchell Whiteman started the session with a welcome to Board members and Commonwealth of Learning (COL) staff members. He thanked COL for inviting the Board to the Retreat, and to discuss the issue of how COL should position itself post-MDGs. After the introduction to the topic, there would be two presentations, one from Mr. Martin Bean and the second from Professor Atta-Ur-Rahman, which is related to our mission of using technologies to enhance learning for development (L4D). The Honourable Whiteman extended a special welcome to the representative from India, Sri Ashok Thakur. The Honourable Whiteman noted that he was very happy to be here, and was looking forward to the forthcoming presentations. He then turned the floor over to Professor Kanwar.

1. Welcome and Overview of the Commonwealth of Learning – Professor Asha Kanwar
Professor Kanwar welcomed all those present to the planning retreat. She said the objective of the retreat was to provide an overview of the current Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and look at where the thinking for future development goals is, what COL's role should be, and what COL should focus on in moving forward. This Board retreat was the first step in initiating the process of

planning for the next Three Year Plan (TYP) 2015-2018, which would be followed by a stakeholder's meeting during PCF7, two regional Focal Point meetings, the second Board retreat in 2014, two more regional Focal Point meetings, concluding with a draft TYP 2015-2018. The two evaluations would feed into the process.

Professor Kanwar noted that COL's two-fold agenda was (a) to accelerate progress towards achieving MDGs, and (b) to position COL for a post-MDG world. She talked about the unmet goals, COL's minimum intervention – maximum impact approach, the new challenges that have arisen, and the use of technology in addressing these challenges. She referred to COL's predominant regions of focus, namely Africa, South Asia and the Small States.

Professor Kanwar said that COL's primary strengths were: (a) its expertise in learning for development, (b) its responsiveness, (c) its flexibility, (d) its network of partners, and (e) its ability to act as a bridge between the IADGs and Commonwealth country priorities. She then referred to Amartya Sen's book, *Development as Freedom*, and the capability approach outlined in the book as it relates to COL. She said that learning develops capability for: (a) personal autonomy and independence of thought, (b) livelihoods, and (c) social relations, identity, and good citizenship.

In the post-MDG world, Professor Kanwar considered COL's primary challenges to be: (a) achieving a threshold level of operations, (b) coordination between ministries of education, health and agriculture, (c) balance between stakeholder expectations, and (d) its ability to maintain focus within competing demands. The key emerging opportunities were: (a) the scaling up of massive open online courses (MOOC), (b) COL's partnerships with multilateral agencies and regional networks, and (c) economic growth in Commonwealth countries, which could lead to increased partnerships with the private sector and south-south collaboration.

Professor Kanwar concluded her presentation by asking the floor: *what can COL realistically achieve post-MDGs, and how could COL position itself in the emerging development agenda*?

Professor Kanwar invited Mr. Vis Naidoo to the floor to present an overview of the current MDGs and trends post-MDGs.

2. Overview of current MDGs and trends – Mr. Vis Naidoo

Mr. Naidoo talked to his PowerPoint presentation, giving a context to the day's agenda. He provided a history of the MDGs, the eight goals and their aim. He reviewed the six Education for All goals, and their relationship to the MDGs, noting that clear targets had been mapped, which some countries would achieve, some not, and others partially. Even though progress towards achieving the MDGs has been uneven, he said the MDGs were still valuable for the following reasons:

- The MDGs brought attention to human development that is not based solely on income

- They provide a political and operational framework to achieving goals

- Best practices have been identified with measureable outcomes, which supports progress towards achieving the MDGs

- They strengthen the commitment of developed countries to helping developing countries.

Following the 2010 MDGs Summit and work undertaken by the Commonwealth Secretariat Ministerial Working Group, Mr. Naidoo noted that the emerging framework for the post-2015 MDG agenda appears to be: (a) economic development, (b) environment, and (c) social inclusion. The fundamental enabling values are: (a) equity, (b) human rights, (c) peace, (d) equality, and (e) democracy.

A summary of the United Nation's report, titled *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development* indicated a new global partnership consisting of 12 goals, five transformations, and 7 cross-cutting issues.

Mr. Naidoo ended his presentation by asking the following three questions:

1. What is your perspective on the key development focus beyond 2015?
2. What can COL do to contribute effectively to the IADGs?
3. How can COL address the various challenges it faces?

The following comments from the floor were noted:

- The MDGs have done good but have also caused some damage. The damage caused is due to lack of focus on higher education, in particular science and technology, with little emphasis on innovation and entrepreneurship. These areas are the key engines or pillars in development, and must be integrated into the post-2015 MDGs.

- It was noted from the floor that the United Nations report focuses on entrepreneurship and innovation; these key areas are being taken into account.

- In the Caribbean, young males are dropping out of higher education. Female enrolment is at 60% to 70%. The ratio of female to male enrolment in higher education is 2:1. This will have a huge impact on society in the Caribbean, and COL must give some consideration to these issues. The large male drop-out rate will impact families, society and crime.

- What is COL's work in governance in relation to the MDGs? The development community look at the MDGs and development in a different manner. It is important to understand what we are committed to, and how the MDGs guide our work moving forward.

- In many multilaterals, emphasis has shifted away from higher education to vocational training. Many governments aspire to increase the number of skilled labourers, rather than university graduates. COL has to be cognizant of this difference in emphasis.

- Perhaps the post-2015 era should allow countries to develop their own targets in relation to the MDG's presented.

- In developing the post-2015 MDGs, we must address the failure of the current MDGs; the failure of agency.

Professor Kanwar thanked the Board for their comments. She then invited Mr. Martin Bean, Vice Chancellor of the Open University in the United Kingdom to the floor.

3. FutureLearn – Mr. Martin Bean
Mr. Bean gave a presentation on FutureLearn, the Open University's approach to massive open online courses (MOOC) offered by Udacity, MITx, Coursera, and edX. Mr. Bean believes MOOCs

will be the most disruptive force in education seen in our lives. He noted that in the U.S.A., student loan debt is larger than credit card or mortgage debt. Student loan debt impacts the economy, as people are not able to enter the home-buyer market.

Mr. Bean thought MOOCs were very relevant to COL's work, as it was a means of scaling up with minimum cost. He noted that higher education is a large part of the developing world economy, so it made sense to use new methods to offer education at a minimal cost.

Mr. Bean asked the floor for questions.

Q: Has any analysis been undertaken on take-up and demand?
A: You have to go to the Coursera website to get this information. Coursera is only one years' old, so there is not much evidence; only anecdotal evidence, but the trends are evident.

Q: What governance model is being used?
A: We are using an extremely transparent governance model. All agreements signed with institutions are non-exclusive, and institutions can leave at any time.

Q: The key quality issue regarding MOOCs is tutorial support. How is tutorial support being provided through FutureLearn?
A: In the MOOCs, forums are moderated by tutors. However, the power of MOOCs is peer-to-peer assistance. Within two years, tutors will be available through the marketplace. It is also important to explain to students what they can and cannot expect from a MOOC. A MOOC is not the same as face-to-face teaching.

Q: MOOCs reach those who have access to broadband. What happens to those who do not have access to ICT and broadband?
A: Those who do not have access to broadband will be in trouble.

Q: Can a mini-MOOC tackle the problem of illiteracy?
A: No, it cannot. MOOCs are not a panacea to all literacy and educational problems.

Q: MOOCs are not reaching the unreached. We need to look at cultural capital; self-learning requires cultural capital. The unreached do not have access to technology, no access to schools, no ICT skills, unable to learn on their own; MOOCs are not helping us to advance a social mandate. MOOCs help developed countries to access and tap into developing world markets.
A: MOOCs are not a one-size fits all. MOOCs are a bridge to using the technology and applying it to other problems.

Professor Kanwar thanked Mr. Bean for his presentation, and invited Professor Dr. Atta-Ur-Rahman, Patron-in-Chief at the International Center for Chemical and Biological Sciences in Pakistan to the floor.

4. Knowledge Across Borders – Professor Dr. Atta-Ur-Rahman

Professor Atta-Ur-Rahman noted that MOOCs are playing a central role in providing quality higher education in Pakistan. He said that within two weeks, Pakistan would launch its first free national education service, through television and through the internet. The education service would be

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comprised of thousands of courses from Coursera, MITx, Khan Academy and others, which could be extended to other Commonwealth countries. MOOCs were being integrated in to universities to be part of the curriculum, or were part of a system where students could study on their own.

Professor Atta-Ur-Rahman asked the floor for questions.

Q: I notice you are offering MOOCs from external sources; are there any plans to develop your own MOOCs?
A: Yes, they are already in development.

Q: Is the meta search engine you have developed on the web?
A: Yes, and it is fully operational.

Q: Given that the national education service is accessing various open access data from around the world, how are you getting around the need for individual tutoring?
A: MOOCs should be integrated into university courses as an add-on. In existing universities, students have access to physical interaction, but the needs are different for those studying at a distance. MOOCs are not the answer for all problems.

Q: We have a programme in place which is very similar to that of Pakistan. It is a $1 B scheme, which was started in 2009. We have encountered the following challenges:

- *content development and standardisation*

- *problem in using television; 15 channels will be launched shortly*

- *how to give credit for free courses.*

MOOCs have to be adapted to the local needs of the country.
A: It would be good to look at how we could work together moving forward.

Professor Kanwar thanked Professor Atta-Ur-Rahman for his presentation, and invited Mr. Naidoo to the floor.

5. Questions to reflect on

Mr. Naidoo presented the following three questions:

1. What is your perspective on the key development focus beyond 2015?

2. What can COL do to contribute effectively to the IADGs?

3. How can COL address the various challenges it faces?

He asked the floor to consider these questions from a Commonwealth perspective, and solicited their guidance as to how COL should position itself for the next TYP. Mr. Naidoo said that the groups had 30 minutes to discuss the questions, and then present their recommendations. He noted that the floor had seen examples from the United Kingdom and Pakistan in terms of what they were currently doing in the field of education, which gave ideas as to what is happening in the Commonwealth, and areas that COL could tap into. He requested groups to nominate a spokesperson to present the ideas captured at each table.

The five groups consisted of:

Group 1: Ms. Alison Mead Richardson, The Honourable Dr. Dame Carol Kidu, Dr. Venkataraman Balaji, Ms. Mia Mouelhi, Professor Narend Baijnath, Ms. Rosanne Wong.

Group 2: Ms. Angela Kwan, Dr. Mark Bullen, Professor Dr. Atta-Ur-Rahman, Dr. K. Balasubramanian, Ms. Anfal Saqib, Ms. Nicola Watt.

Group 3: Professor John Wood, Mr. Ashok Thakur, Professor Asha Kanwar, The Honourable Burchell Whiteman, HE Mrs. Mariam Yalwaji Katagum, Mr. John Lesperance.

Group 4: Ms. Frances Ferreira, Mr. Martin Bean, Ms. Doris McEachern, Professor Clement Sankat, Dr. Abdurrahman Umar, Mr. David Geyer.

Group 5: Mr. Dave Wright, Professor Madhulika Kaushik, Dr. Linda Sissons, Mr. Vis Naidoo, Professor Akilagpa Sawyerr, Mr. Ian Pringle.

Following discussions amongst the groups, a representative from each group was asked to present their group's responses to the questions raised.

6. Group Response

Group 1: represented by Professor Narend Baijnath
Professor Baijnath captured the Group's comments in a PowerPoint presentation.

1. *What is your perspective on the key development focus beyond 2015?*
    Professor Baijnath noted that the world has a lot of challenges, and that COL has to be careful of not taking on the world's problems, thereby diluting COL's strengths. He asked the question; *what are priorities that best match COL's capabilities?*

2. *What can COL do to contribute effectively to the IADGs?*
    COL should:

    - Define its comparative advantage; and realise its limitations

    - Expand its strategic partnerships, such as other development agencies e.g. AusAID. COL should bring insight to the broader development agenda

    - Act as a vehicle or enabler/broker of knowledge. With staff consisting of 34 people, is COL the enabler or the broker?

    - Guard against dilution

    - Consider setting up regional structures, and making them COL's agencies. COL should support regional structures and use local resources. Rather than doing activities in the region; have regional centres do the work.

3. *How can COL address the various challenges it faces?*
    COL should:

    - Raise its profile and visibility

- Maintain its strength of being small and a niche player

- Balance between being responsive and being driven by an agenda. COL needs to find the balance between objectives of the board and the local stakeholders

- Focus on being flexible and adaptive to local needs and realities – in its models and its approaches; and be wary of too wide a spread

- Prioritise areas where leverage can be best achieved with available resources and capacities

- Be flexible and adaptive to local needs and realities – in its models and approaches.

Group 2: represented by Ms. Nicola Watt
Ms. Watt gave a brief overview of her Group's discussion. She noted that the new proposals for post-2015 MDGs were very complex and broad, which represented a lot of uncertainty for COL.

With respect to how COL could contribute to the IADGs, she noted that the IADGs only talk about "the what", not "the how", i.e., there is no roadmap as to how to get to the end goal. COL could build capacities within countries to develop their own roadmap. The focus on achieving the goals would be on quality.

As to how to address the challenges COL faces, her Group suggested COL look for scalable projects, and demonstrate its impact on these projects. Due to its limited resources, COL must be careful of what it takes on, and to ensure that what it does take on has impact. COL should select a few key projects that will make a difference. COL should have a set of criteria that it can use to determine which projects it should take on.

Group 3: represented by Mr. John Lesperance
Mr. Lesperance presented on behalf of his Group. In response to the questions raised,

1. *What is your perspective on the key development focus beyond 2015?*
    COL should:

    - Empower the individual by providing access to more information and aligning learning to development

    - Work towards attaining sustainable development. COL should take a more integrated and holistic approach within its initiatives

    - Commonwealth countries should work more collectively – a more interconnected Commonwealth.

2. *What can COL do to contribute effectively to the IADGs?*
    COL should:

    - Help to fill in the gaps in the various cultural communities, i.e., new types of jobs are emerging in skills development, such as web training, the green economy such as wind and solar power, etc.

    - Teach people how to learn, i.e., problem-solving skills

- Advocate for common values, respect and understanding, and help people to understand each other.

3. *How can COL address the various challenges it faces?*
   COL should continue to persevere and focus its work at the country level, focus on what it does, and do it well.

Group 4: represented by Mr. Martin Bean
Mr. Bean captured his Group's comments in a mind map, reported as follows:

1. *What is your perspective on the key development focus beyond 2015?*
   COL should:

   - Ask the question: *what would the 1 minute value statement be*?

   - Be wary that it doesn't get stuck in yesterday. COL must look at what the future challenges look like

   - Consider what makes it distinctive:

     o COL's niche is open and distance learning (ODL). It can ride the wave of MOOCs, as well as consider the role of technology in ODL

     o Focus on lowering cost and improving quality – the iron triangle

     o A consensus builder: what is the future of VUSSC?

2. *What can COL do to contribute effectively to the IADGs?*
   COL should:

   - Focus not just on the goals but the enabling environment

   - Be careful of thinking of the MDG's as finished

   - Be part of the future state, a pathway to funding.

3. *How can COL address the various challenges it faces?*
   COL must:

   - Be focused

   - Take a leadership role in the dialogue

   - Amass the evidence base to justify the impact.

Group 5: represented by Professor Akilagpa Sawyerr
On behalf of his group, Professor Sawyerr said his Group ignored the first question, as it relates to big issues and problems that COL could not address. He noted that COL's role is to (a) help shape the post-MDG goals, and (b) be an actor.

Professor Sawyerr noted that there was inadequate focus on the individual and their role in development, which his Group considered a crucial missing link in the discussion. In systemic change, the notion of learning becomes central. Learning is critical to development; it empowers and engages people. COL must focus on the individual in the learning process; it should therefore inject

learning in all of the goals, which would act as a catalyst for development. COL should focus on being a catalyst, and consider changing its by-line to "Learning for sustainable development". Professor Sawyerr's Group considered COL's special features (a) its size, which it could expand through the leveraging of partnerships, and (b) its niche of reaching the unreachable.

Professor Sawyerr closed by asking the question: *what is the nature of technology at COL*?

Mr. Naidoo thanked the spokespersons for presenting their Group's discussions. He invited Professor Kanwar to the floor.

7. Wrap-up

Professor Kanwar thanked everyone for their input, noting that it was a rare opportunity to have the Board's involvement. She said that COL was thinking of changing its by-line to "Learning for Sustainable Development."

Professor Kanwar thanked all those present for a very worthwhile day.

The retreat ended at 16:30.