

Technical and Vocational Education and Training in the Pacific through Open and Distance Learning



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the Pacific through Open and Distance Learning*

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Introduction

I am delighted to greet you in the name of the Commonwealth of Learning with equally warm feelings for Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth countries alike. In all regions of the world COL deals with regional organisations like the Pacific Forum that include a mixture of countries. COL has no feelings of exclusiveness and, with my background at UNESCO, neither do I.

It is a great pleasure to be back in Samoa, which I last visited when I was Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO. Then as now, Samoa, in the person of Minister of Education Fiamé Mata'Afa, was a wonderful host and I thank her for the warm welcome we have received. I must add that the Commonwealth of Learning's gratitude to Faimé goes far beyond her memorable Samoan welcomes.

She served as the Pacific representative on COL's Board of Governors for the maximum term of six years from 1998 to 2004 and gave tremendous service, representing this region most effectively. We shall miss her very much. We shall now welcome the Vice-President and Minister of Education of Kiribati, Ms Teima Onorio, as the new representative from the Pacific and we look forward to working with her.

I am honoured to be with you at this meeting and to sense for myself the rapidly developing regional collaboration in education and training through the Pacific Forum and through PRIDE.

My task today is to bring you up to date on the important aspect of education in the Pacific that is expressed in my title: Technical and Vocational Education and Training in the Pacific through Open and Distance Learning. I am very pleased that you have made this a theme of this meeting, because technical

and vocational education and training, or TVET, is where the action must be nowadays. You have the considerable challenge of striking a balance between the development of higher education, which is important, and the expansion of TVET, which is even more important because it affects the lives of more people.

First I shall make some general remarks about learning, development and technology. Second, I shall talk about the evolution of TVET. Third, I shall describe what COL has been doing with you to help the development of TVET in the Pacific. Fourth, I shall talk about the resources for this work and express my thanks to those countries that support COL's work and urge those that are not yet on board to join those that are.

Finally, I shall note some of the other things that we are doing together, including the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, a concept which you and your predecessors launched back in 2000 and reinforced at the Edinburgh meeting of Commonwealth Ministers of Education in 2003.

Learning, Development and Technology

First then, you as Ministers face the challenge of development. Development, which means expanding the freedoms that your people enjoy, is fundamentally a massive challenge of learning. The challenge is huge. There are four billion people living at the bottom of the world economic pyramid. Conventional methods of teaching and learning, however flexible and effective they may be in the right context, simply cannot address the scope and scale of the challenge.

In most areas of life technology has made it possible to address such challenges of scope and scale. Products and services that were once the preserve of the rich are now so much cheaper and so much better that they are available and attractive to the masses. The huge challenge of development requires that we now apply technology to learning.

That is the reason for COL's existence. Our fundamental task is to help countries, institutions and individuals to use technology as a means of expanding and improving learning. By technology I do not simply mean electrical and electronic devices with coloured lights. I mean the whole technological approach that applies knowledge and skills to practical problems and includes basic organisational principles like division of labour and specialisation.

COL does not purvey a particular technology but simply tries to help countries and institutions integrate technology into education and training so as to increase the scope, scale and quality of learning and teaching. An important part of our role is to be a catalyst for collaboration.

An important new manifestation of that role is our commitment to Open Educational Resources. The combination of accessible and adaptable learning management systems for eLearning with collaboratively produced learning object repositories that make a rich array of re-usable learning objects readily available is a major advance.

This combination has tremendous potential for the developing world. That is why you asked us for help in setting up the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. This combination of eLearning platforms and open educational resources gives a new meaning to the statement that learning is our common wealth. It also brings closer the day when the central proposition of COL's founders might become a reality. That proposition was that: "...any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth".

For the last 18 years that statement has been a dead letter. However, in this era of Open Educational Resources it could become a reality. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth could be a way of putting this principle into practice.

TVET for All

With that general comment let me turn now specifically to TVET. When I was ADG for Education at UNESCO our main preoccupation was the campaign for Education for All, EFA. That is still very much on our minds and I am delighted to see the progress that PRIDE is making. Where people do not have access to primary education we must help countries to make it available. But most countries in the Pacific have achieved Universal Primary Education.

For you, and for many countries in the world, EFA and basic education now means TVET for all. Across the world 80% of training for jobs is TVET and that figure is higher in developing countries. As Ministers of Education in Pacific countries you have led the world in the emphasis that you place on TVET. Furthermore, you have promoted the linking of education and training and lessened the distinction between the formal and non-formal sectors.

We at COL have been grappling with the relationship between learning, literacy and livelihoods as we design a new programme in this area. It is clear that that the old definition of literacy as the 3R's of Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic is becoming integrated with the 3H's of Head, Heart and Hands. What this means is a greater emphasis on non-formal TVET or what you might call community TVET. By this I mean TVET for the citizens of your islands who do not have formal school qualifications: out-of-school youth, particularly girls; illiterate adults, especially women; and newly literate people who need training. This should be a focus for your next efforts here in the Pacific.

COL and the Pacific Project

But I get ahead of myself. Let us start with a little history. The Commonwealth of Learning has worked in the Pacific for many years, but increased its commitment in March 2000 when Commonwealth Pacific Education Ministers asked COL to help them use appropriate open and distance learning technology to broaden access to technical and vocational education and training. I believe that the only current Education Minister who was at that meeting is Fiamé from Samoa.

Later in 2000 another meeting, in Brisbane, brought together representatives from the TVET sector in

Pacific Commonwealth countries. This developed a brief that called for regional cooperation, capacity building and resource creation as the keys to better access to TVET and DfID promised to fund the initiative for three years.

COL then asked assistance from the region's major provider of TVET by open and distance learning, the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (TOPNZ). Jenny Williams, a manager in TOPNZ Learning Design area with a perfect background for the task was seconded to COL to manage the Pacific Project Office in July 2001. Jenny is here with us to today and I pay tribute to the extraordinary job that she has done as COL's head, heart and hands in the Pacific.

Regional Cooperation

So what have we achieved? First, under the heading of regional cooperation, COL encouraged and facilitated the creation of the Pacific Association of Technical, Vocational Education and Training (PATVET). PATVET quickly became a robust organisation and an active partner in the COL Pacific project, making its first presentation to Ministers in December 2002. Mr Perive Lene, the CEO of Samoa Polytechnic and Chair of PATVET is here with us and will inform you of the excellent progress of this active and inclusive regional group.

With the support of the Pacific Forum Secretariat PATVET commissioned an environmental scan on TVET policies in the Pacific countries which is available to you here. They are also compiling an inventory of TVET providers and courses in the Pacific with funding from UNESCO and COL. This inventory will be an important step in facilitating qualification recognition, credit transfer and labour mobility.

Capacity Building

Second, with the aim of building capacity, three Leadership Training Institutes have held in New Zealand with the support of COL, NZAID and TOPNZ. They helped Chief Executives and other leaders of TVET providers to understand how open and flexible learning can be applied in the region. PATVET, COL and UNESCO have supported meetings at Samoa Polytechnic and in Suva to reinforce the development of TVET in the region.

COL has also sponsored attachments of Pacific TVET staff to TOPNZ, has organised in-country workshops, and, rather appropriately, has supported staff who choose to study at a distance themselves. We are very proud of the three staff members at Samoa Polytechnic who are taking a Master's degree by distance learning with India's Indira Gandhi National Open University with our support. One of the Samoan students won the medal as the world's best student at the diploma level, which should make you all proud.

You can see some of the products our capacity-building work in the display area here. This has come from the multi-media centres developed through COL's Media Empowerment Program, which has helped with equipment and training in Fiji, Kiribas Samoa and Vanuatu. One of those centres is located at the

Samoa Polytechnic here in Apia.

All this work is now yielding fruit. I congratulate the Fiji Institute of Technology that has built on COL's help to develop distance learning programmes that are already being offered in Fiji and will be made available to other countries as they develop their know-how.

A small pilot project in Tuvalu has increased the knowledge and skills of a hundred adult students through print-based distance learning. Although COL's funding for this initiative ends in June, we hope that donor agencies will recognise that this approach allows learners in remote locations to remain in-country while gaining recognised qualifications.

Finally, under capacity building, we have recently announced the results of the latest competition for COL-PROTEIN awards. PROTEIN is an acronym for Poverty Reduction Outcomes Through Education Innovation and Networks. I am delighted to say that an award of \$CAD 20,000 goes to a project in the Solomon Islands: the Rural Development Volunteer Association of Honiara for its Youth First Computer Centre.

The aim is to improve computer literacy and awareness of ICT among rural school students, school push-outs and young people so that they could pursue further education and find means of self-improvement and have a prominent role in the Information Society and in their nation's development. The process will involve institutional strengthening of a Youth First Computer Centre better to serve as a national focal point for ICT and provide affordable access to computers, the Internet, training, and advice to young people.

Resource Creation

You are building on these developments in regional cooperation and capacity building in the third area of resource creation. Here I am pleased to note a number of encouraging initiatives.

The Tarawa Technical Institute in Kiribati has taken a Supervisory Skills Certificate and adapted a face-to-face course for distance delivery. The distance course has since been adapted by the Fiji Institute of Technology and is being delivered to learners in Fiji.

A course for Learning about Small Business was developed at the request of Ministers who wanted to encourage entrepreneurial skill at community level, for people who were semi-literate or only literate in their own languages. Samoa Polytechnic has adapted and translated the material, and trained trainers to deliver the material in the community. PNG and Vanuatu are now also adapting this material. Three community level courses in Tourism have been designed and developed with representatives from Tonga, Vanuatu and Samoa.

Nauru, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau wanted courses in Basic Trades for Small Islands, so representatives from these countries met to determine the content and level required. A first course, Working with Timber, is now available and being piloted in-country. There are tutor and student

workbooks, plus video shot by the COL multi-media centres in each kit. The next course, Working with Concrete, is available in draft and is currently being evaluated by PATVET members. The last course in the series, Working with Small Engines, (the sorts of engines in outboards, brush cutters and chainsaws) has been commissioned by COL and will be developed this year. I encourage you to look at samples of all these learning materials in the display area.

I hope you will agree that this is a significant record of achievement in a relatively short period and I am particularly pleased by the sharing and joint development of material. This has been done by your people. You must judge the effectiveness of COL's role but I believe that we have been an essential catalyst to many of the processes.

Resources

COL needs resources to do this kind of work. Here may I thank publicly the Ministers whose countries have contributed to COL's budget. I thank the Minister from Tonga, The Honourable Reverend Dr. Tevita Hala Palefau for his country's generous support and I thank the Honourable Dr. Alesana Seluka for the contribution from Tuvalu. Let me again express my deep gratitude to our host, the Honourable Faimé Mata'Afa, not only for the financial support from Samoa but for her dedicated work as COL's Board member from the Pacific for the last six years.

I noted that her place will be taken by the Honourable Ms Teima Onorio, from Kiribati. I welcome her and thank her for committing to make a financial contribution to COL from Kiribati. Finally, I express my warm thanks to the Honourable Trevor Mallard, the Minister from New Zealand, and to NZAID for their stalwart support to COL and its work in the Pacific.

Could I urge the other Commonwealth countries present to commit to a contribution to COL, however modest. A meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government, CHOGM, will be held in Malta in November and you may wish to arrange for your Heads of Government to announce a contribution to COL at that time. These contributions are important because Britain, one of our major supporters, judges our usefulness to other countries partly by their willingness to contribute to COL's budget. To encourage you the UK augments any contribution that you give us by an additional 30%.

I hope I have shown that COL is helping to make useful things happen in your countries. If you agree, then please contribute. If you do not agree, then please tell me how we can better help you.

Please understand that with the end of DfID's funding for the Pacific TVET Project, COL will not be able to support it at the level of the last four years. One manifestation of this will be that there will be less support from the COL Pacific Office at TOPNZ. I do assure you, however, that we are looking for ways of continuing to support the various projects. COL is determined to support the small countries of the Pacific and we value your support in return.

Looking to the Future

Let me end, therefore, with some comments about the future. Yours is a very special part of the Commonwealth and the world. Unlike countries with huge populations on large land masses, you occupy a vast ocean with approximately 8 million people in the 12 Commonwealth countries. You are spread across 679 islands and atolls, and there are about 935 languages spoken.

Global warming is something you understand and confront as it threatens the viability of some of your nations. The global economy reaches right into the lives on the most remote atoll. Many of your countries have very young populations, and a desperate need for skilled workers. The focus that the Pacific Education Ministers have chosen to put on technical, vocational education and training at this meeting, reflects these realities.

COL shares your belief in the continuing need for regional cooperation, the sharing of media resources, the development of learning materials, the preservation of cultural integrity, and increasing access to learning opportunities.

Your regional organisation, PATVET, is a powerful network to encourage networking and sharing of resources, and there is a willingness of larger countries to share their expertise with smaller, less well resourced nations. A number of excellent resources have been developed in the region with COL's expertise and support, and we look forward to seeing more of these adapted, translated and used throughout the region. These practical, community-level learning materials are helping people acquire useful transferable skills and become self-sufficient.

In our current three year plan COL is also working on health education. Three of the eight MDG's target health (improvement of maternal health, reduction of infant mortality and prevention of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis). COL is using its expertise to partner with the World Health Organisation and the NGO sector in Africa, Asia and the Pacific.

We have a health activity in the Solomon Islands with the Solomon Islands Development Trust, an NGO. We are developing the capacity of this NGO to create videos about health issues set in the linguistic and cultural context of the country. Health training will be delivered through what we call village cinema in the different provinces of the Solomons. COL has also aided an organisation in Kiribati in developing videos on health issues among young I-Kiribati citizens. We are now planning, with the WHO, an activity in Papua New Guinea to be implemented later this year.

COL has recently commissioned an environmental scan on literacy and livelihoods and natural resource management in the region, with a particular focus on PNG, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Fiji. This will give us, and you, a useful baseline against which to measure future progress.

The PATVET inventory of all TVET providers and courses available in the region that is currently being compiled will give you information to begin to build regional systems of credit and qualification recognition and portability. I consider that the regional cooperation and mutual support that you are

demonstrating in advancing TVET in the Pacific is an example to the world of how small states can cooperate effectively while maintaining their cultural identity and integrity.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

Finally, I must thank you for your communications with me in relation to the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. I won't waste time telling you about the consultation process because you were part of it. What did you tell us?

Many small states want to improve access to higher education in order to improve skills and knowledge as a step to achieving their vision for the country. You see your existing national institutions as important players in the virtual university and hope that it will be a catalyst in encouraging collaboration between national and regional education institutions.

You also want the virtual university to strengthen national accreditation systems and develop the skills necessary for setting standards and establishing quality assurance mechanisms. It should be a mechanism for creating greater synergy between regional and national qualifications frameworks and accreditation.

A vital need is to build the capacity of staff in your institutions so that they can participate in the virtual university with the skills to deliver courses via eLearning, especially skills for materials development, writing for e-and distance education courses, and using learning objects and learning object repositories. Also important is the need to provide effective support services for students involved in eLearning, studying either face to face or by distance education. People also need help in identifying and installing the appropriate technology platforms for developing and delivering e-courses.

Staff training in eLearning methods should not be limited to the education sector. You want the virtual university to train staff in the agriculture, health and social development sectors so that they can use eLearning as well.

Regarding types of course, you called for degree, diploma and short professional development courses. Pre-service and in-service training of teachers are priorities and teachers must acquire the skills to use ICTs and support on-line learning. Training in ICTs is a general need in order to support their application to areas such as e-government, health, tourism and business.

However, some of you also said that you needed courses to support basic literacy, numeracy and life skills. Some linked this to the support of out-of-school youth and remote populations. In the health sector responses focused on on-going professional development of doctors and nurses as well as the training of nurses. Some also stressed the need to support culture and heritage and to educate adults in civic-involvement, democracy and governance.

We shall now proceed to pull together coalitions of states and institutions to work on these areas and we shall shortly be in touch with the contact persons that you have named.

Conclusion

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to address you. COL is proud to have been a partner in your achievements and will continue to, the best of its ability to help you advance the development of the nations of the Pacific by bringing new approaches to education and training. Learning and development are closely linked and we shall work with you to see that the peoples of the Pacific benefit fully from the new technologies that increase their opportunities to learn and so improve their livelihoods.