



President's Report

COL is two years into its Strategic Plan 2015-2021 'Learning for Sustainable Development'. The progress in terms of results and revenues has been very encouraging. Current trends indicate that COL will exceed all targets proposed for 2021. A mid-term evaluation will determine whether the existing targets need to be revisited. It is gratifying to note that the commitments made to our stakeholders over the life of this Plan will be achieved. As a small organisation, COL is able to leverage its impact through the appropriate use of technologies, its network of partners in the field and improved efficiencies. Some significant developments during this year follow.

COL is aligning its work to at least one ministerial priority in each Member State to address a specific need. In response to the Minister of Education, Seychelles, COL has supported the development of an action plan for teacher training in the country. COL signed agreements with ministries of education in Belize, Mozambique, Vanuatu and Zambia to work on multi-year projects to integrate open schooling into the mainstream education system for increasing access to quality secondary education. The High Commissioner of Antigua & Barbuda to the UK requested COL to introduce Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) in her country and the project is already being implemented jointly with two ministries.

The Board requested COL to strengthen its work in the Pacific. In this connection, a Pacific Strategy was developed and discussed with colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand. Their priorities relate to improving the quality of teaching and learning, skills development and strategies for supporting self-sustaining projects. These are being integrated into the regional strategy and will guide our work going forward. The past six months has witnessed an increase in activities, visits by COL staff, and the overall budget expended in the Pacific has increased from 2% to 7%. The Solomon Islands National University is offering a Bachelor's in Business and Entrepreneurship developed by the Virtual University of Small States in the Commonwealth (VUSSC). COL worked with a partner in a rural community in Samoa to build capacity and a study shows that this has not only enhanced the knowledge and skills of the participants, but has also led to increased income and food security. In Tonga, training in financial literacy has been initiated for women and farming communities in collaboration with the Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The Pacific Centre for Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD), supported by COL and hosted by the University of South Pacific, is developing an Open Educational Resources (OER) strategy for the region. The Minister of Education, Kiribati has offered to be a champion of OER and influence his fellow ministers in the region.

The transition from an 'output' to an 'outcome' and 'impact' orientation is nearing completion and a nuanced approach to Monitoring & Evaluation has led to a more critical and reflective

practice than mere bean-counting. Instead of organising one-off workshops requested by partners, COL is adopting a holistic and integrated approach designed to lead to concrete and measurable results. In Kenya, COL supported women to start agri-enterprises and a recent study concludes that learning leads to empowerment and for every 1% increase in empowerment, there is a 2.3% increase in profits. More than 29,000 girls have been trained in various skills for livelihoods in five countries, of which 5,260 girls have found new sources of income generation. A COL research conducted in Botswana showed that the carbon footprint of a VUSSC distance learning student was only one-tenth as compared to that of a campus-based student, without in any way compromising learning outcomes.

COL has been proactive in raising its international profile through innovations and thought-leadership. COL received additional funding from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to organise six regional consultations on OER globally. The final two consultations for Latin America & the Caribbean and the Pacific were held in Sao Paulo and Auckland respectively during April and May. It is significant that all the consultations were successfully organised within an eight-month timeframe. Governments of 94 countries participated in the surveys sent out by COL and over 300 participants from 105 countries attended the regional meetings. Based on the responses received, COL will prepare two reports that will feed into the 2nd World OER Congress to be held in Slovenia in September. OER are a priority for COL during this Strategic Plan. As a COL study in Antigua & Barbuda shows, the use of OER resulted in savings for the students at about EC\$65 per semester, which potentially translates into EC\$904,640 in a year for the entire college if OER are adopted in all the courses. It also indicates student grades improved by 5.5% due to the use of OER, in addition to traditional textbooks. These consultations have raised COL's profile well beyond the Commonwealth. One outcome was that the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), with 22 Member States, came forward with the request to sign an MOU for further collaboration in OER and Technology-enabled Learning.

During this financial year, COL has recorded the highest revenues received from Member States and from additional contributions than in any previous year so far. This has resulted in healthy reserves and a more confident budgetary allocation for 2017-2018. Because of the voluntary nature of its funding, COL will continue to be accountable to its stakeholders.

The Commonwealth Charter recognises that the future of the Commonwealth will depend on our commitment to youth development by creating opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship. For COL, the ultimate stakeholder is the out-of-school youth in a remote village in Trinidad & Tobago; the indigenous bee-keeper in the forests of Uganda; the woman goat herder in a remote village in India; the teacher in a rural school in Samoa. Equity and inclusion are essential for achieving sustainable development. As former Commonwealth Secretary-General, HE Don McKinnon wrote 'the Commonwealth's credibility will be sustained if the 'have-nots' believe that you continue to work in their best interest' (*In the Ring*, p. 298). COL is committed to promoting this agenda.

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