

Launch of Professor Asha Kanwar ODeL Center



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Kenya Technical Trainers College
Nairobi, Kenya

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Distinguished Colleagues, thank you for the invitation to mark the inauguration of the ODeL Centre. It is a rare privilege to be amongst you after the lockdowns and closures we experienced during the pandemic. It was a challenging time for everyone but despite the difficulties, you did not in falter in your support to the Commonwealth of Learning. It is because of such unflinching commitment of partners that COL was able to keep up the momentum of its work. Thanks to the leadership of Dr Edwin Tarno and to each and every one of you who made this possible.

We are here for the 21st Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers being hosted by the Hon Prof George Magoha. Kenya is an active member of the Commonwealth and provides both financial and intellectual contributions to COL. Over the years, we have developed a close partnership with KTTC and having your former staff member Robert Okinda as our colleague will further strengthen this bond.

As you know, COL's mandate is to support Commonwealth member states and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for human resource development. The covid-19 pandemic led to institutional closures, job losses and increased skills gaps in Kenya in services like agriculture, construction and manufacturing. There is an urgent need to skill and reskill our citizens for these jobs. As one recent study points out, the main barriers to training human resource at scale have been costs, infrastructural deficits and attitudes to technology. How can distance learning and technologies help?

New Zealand and Australia, have used distance and blended approaches to TVET for more than 70 years. In Australia, distance education for TVET was first used in 1910 when Sydney Technical College, launched an emergency correspondence course to train health inspectors in response to a typhoid epidemic.

In New Zealand, in 1946, the Technical Correspondence School, now operating as the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, was established to train returned servicemen and women following World War II. The Institute offered theory by distance for apprentices across the country as there was no technical school nearby.

During the lockdown, Shanghai used simulation, 'demo videos, practical operations live and after-class practice'. Similarly in the US, virtual reality was introduced for training nurses. We need to

find technology solutions for practicals that can work in low bandwidth situations and courses that are available as OER.

COL has been supporting TVET in Kenya since 2010. Partners include the Ministry of Education, Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority, National Industrial Training Authority, and several TVET institutions including the Kenya Technical Trainers College. To ensure Kenya's national TVET institutions have the capacity for developing and delivering quality courses, COL has initiated a mentorship programme for staff at TVETA on quality assurance, and technical support for implementing ODL programmes.

Through COL support, KTTC established its Open Distance and eLearning department in 2013 and subsequently developed its ODeL policy and strategy with robust capacity building, making KTTC the prime institution for blended TVET in the country. As an immediate response to the Covid-19 pandemic, COL supported the establishment of a TVET Learning Resource Catalogue. I understand this will be shared nationally. COL's partnership with KTTC has resulted in the development and offering of several courses including on disability needs assessment and assistive technologies. Supporting persons with disabilities and women is of particular importance to COL.

Using blended learning approaches, COL is building the capacity of subject matter experts in engineering and textiles to develop competency based OER, aligned to the national occupational standards approved by TVETA. COL is also supporting KTTC and industry partners, to re-skill, up-skill and new-skill Master Craftsmen and women in the informal sector for blended apprenticeship training which will commence next month. I hope that the launching of the ODeL Center at KTTC, will mark a new phase in strengthening the capability of pre-service and in-service technical and vocational trainers to integrate online and blended learning in their training practices. This will go a long way in skilling and reskilling Kenyans for employment and entrepreneurship.

COL's model blends workplace plus online learning for training that aligns with national qualifications. The model is more cost-effective through the development and sharing of open education resources which can be reused and repurposed nationally and across Africa.

How does the model work? The first step is a partnership between a TVET institution and an industry partner to identify skills gaps. Industry experts and academics then work together to design a blended learning experience and develop learning and assessment materials for joint delivery. Another key element of the model is capacity building, which include developing videos and online materials.

Can practical skills be developed online? Learning practical skills begins with observing and then imitating followed by practice and more practice. Competence involves more than just being able to do the task – it is practice until the skill becomes instinctive when the furniture maker can 'feel the wood', so to speak. Feedback is important so that the learner is guided in how to learn the correct techniques and continue improving. Online learning can contribute by enabling observation of practical skills through videos, digital resources and manuals. Some imitation is possible through virtual reality and simulations. Where online learning environments really add value is in the assessment of practical skills.

One of the challenges for our learners is the cost of data to access the internet. Our model overcomes this challenge through placing the materials on AptusPi, a device developed by COL. This allows learners to access the digital resources without the need for connectivity. Learners will only need to use data for final assessment tasks and for sharing portfolios of evidence with the institution.

For the long term, we need enabling policies and the involvement of government agencies for achieving both speed and scale. It is always a pleasure to work with our friends in Kenya, and we look forward to our continued collaboration. COL is your organisation and it works for you—please take full advantage of its expertise and resources.