

COL in the Commonwealth: How technology can help you in an economic downturn



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PRESENTATION TO MINISTERS

*COL in the Commonwealth: How technology can help
you in an economic downturn*

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Transcript

Honourable Ministers

It is a pleasure to be here at 17CCEM with COL's Chair, His Excellency the Honourable Burchell Whiteman. We are greatly privileged to have such a distinguished and experienced former minister as our Board Chair and it is a personal pleasure to work with him.

We shall hold the annual meeting of our Board of Governors here tomorrow. Our Board Members are here and I hope you have them been able to meet some of them during the week.

The purpose of my short presentation today is to persuade you to ratify COL's Three-Year Plan for 2009-2012. I shall not go into the detail of the plan but simply explain how COL can help you sustain education in an economic downturn.

We have given you two documents.

The first is *COL in the Commonwealth: 2006-2009 Country Reports*. This tells you what COL has done in each of your countries in the last three years. After 16CCEM in Cape Town we developed with you a specific Action Plan for each of your countries. *COL in the Commonwealth* contains 53 reports on the fulfilment of those plans. They are arranged by region and we also give summaries of regional and pan-Commonwealth work.

We can use these reports as springboards to design Country Action Plans for the next three years with

each of you in the weeks following this Conference.

The second document, called *Learning for Development*, is our Three-Year Plan for 2009-2012, approved by COL's Board of Governors, which I respectfully invite you to ratify today.

This morning I shall explain the essence of the expertise and assistance that COL offers you and show why it is particularly relevant in an economic downturn.

COL's mission is to help Commonwealth governments take advantage of the revolution of educational technology. What is that revolution?

Your challenge as Ministers of Education is threefold. First, you want to maximise *access* to education, training and learning opportunities. That challenge is even greater when the economy is bad because your people seek more education and training to improve their value in the job market.

Second, you want to make the *quality* of learning as high as you can.

Third, you want to do this at the lowest possible cost so that your education budget stretches as far as possible. That too is a special challenge right now.

Think of these three aims as vectors making up a triangle: Access, Quality, and Cost. This highlights the challenge, because with traditional teaching methods this is an iron triangle – it is inflexible.

Whenever you concentrate on any one of your three aims: wider access, better quality or lower cost, you will slip backwards on the others.

Increase access by making classes bigger and parents will complain about quality.

Introduce more learning materials – which are usually in short supply – and costs will go up.

Cut the costs of the system and people will accuse you of limiting access and damaging quality.

The constraints of this iron triangle have handicapped education throughout history. They explain why so many people believe that you cannot have education of quality unless you make access to it exclusive.

But we live in revolutionary times. Technology allows you to increase access, improve quality, and cut costs *all at the same time*.

By technology I mean the technological principles of economy of scale, specialisation, and division of labour, which are more fundamental than electronic devices with flashing lights.

COL's role is to help you exploit this revolution for the benefit of your people.

In our new plan we focus on eight areas where technology can make the iron triangle flexible: wider access, higher quality, lower cost. Some countries are already reaping the benefits of this revolution. We went to extend those benefits across the Commonwealth.

The eight areas are divided into two sectors: an Education Sector where the aim is to strengthen, improve and extend formal education systems; and a Livelihoods and Health Sector where media and technology are used to expand informal learning.

Informal learning is vitally important, but today I shall focus on the Education Sector to show how we can help you exploit the technological revolution to improve your formal education systems.

The first initiative in the *Education Sector* is *Open Schooling* at the secondary level. Your considerable success in achieving Universal Primary Education is sending a surge of tens of millions of youngsters towards secondary education.

Research presented here by Professor Lewin showed that if secondary education costs more than twice as much per child as primary education you will never achieve Universal Secondary Education. In most countries secondary now costs three or four times as much as primary. So what do you do?

Quite a few countries have developed Open Schooling, which is much less expensive if well designed. COL is there to share that expertise.

COL believes that an Open School, as well as catering to large numbers of pupils itself, can be a catalyst for improving all secondary schools in the system with good learning materials. It can also be a mechanism for ensuring that when you introduce computers into schools they add value rather than simply adding cost.

Frances Ferreira, who came to COL after being a successful Director of the Namibian College of Open Learning, leads our Open Schooling work.

Our second initiative is *Teacher Education*. We require millions more teachers worldwide – and not only in developing countries. Conventional teacher education methods cannot cope with the demand. Training teachers through distance learning, both in-service and pre-service, has a long and successful history. It can get costs down and raise both output and quality.

COL can help you harness distance learning to your teacher education challenges. In charge is Dr. Abdurrahman Umar, who was formerly Academic Director of the Nigerian Teachers' Institute, the world's largest institution for training teachers through distance learning.

Third, we support *Higher Education*, with a particular focus on quality assurance in distance learning and the use of ICTs. A number of your countries in Africa are creating open universities to add red dots to this map. We are here to help with that – as well as with the bigger challenge of adding distance learning to campus universities.

Dr. Willie Clarke-Okah, a Nigerian-Canadian formerly with Canadian CIDA, leads that work. He is also leading our response to the Secretary-General's request to use the media to engage young people in the drive for respect and understanding. I spoke about that yesterday.

Fourth, we had a special session on Sunday about the *Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth*. Your predecessors as Ministers conceived this idea at 14CCEM in Halifax.

It is not a new university but a collaborative network through which Small States work together to prepare eLearning materials, as Open Educational Resources, in skills related areas. This has put the Small States at the leading edge.

Less than 10 years ago Massachusetts Institute of Technology launched the Open Educational Resources movement by sharing its faculty's lecture notes on the web. The UK Open University followed up by sharing its self-learning materials.

The VUSSC is creating a third generation of Open Educational Resources by developing courses through international online collaboration. Open Educational Resources are a vital new boost to the technological revolution because they can help you cut the cost of learning materials while increasing their relevance to local needs.

Through the VUSSC my African colleagues Paul West and John Lesperance have helped the Small States leapfrog to the forefront of the use of ICTs in teaching.

The 32 Small States are all on board and have developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework so that the eLearning courses can be used Commonwealth wide. This is particularly important since small states are a special prey for bogus institutions called degree mills.

Two new degree mills appeared on our radar just yesterday, so I ask you all to be aggressive in fighting degree mills on your territories. They do great damage to legitimate postsecondary education everywhere.

I refer you to the Plan for the four initiatives in the *Livelihoods and Health Sector*, which make an equally important contribution to *Learning for Development*.

Please note that COL's Vancouver team is assisted by our dynamic unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Media Centre for Asia. Under the leadership of its Director, Ramamurthy Sreedher it advances COL's programme generally and does groundbreaking work in the development new technologies here in Asia

That, Honourable Ministers, is COL's programme. Please choose items from this menu to match your country priorities. Our Vice-President, Professor Asha Kanwar from India, will organise that matching process to develop Country Action Plans with you.

I end by expressing double thanks. First, thank you for appointing Focal Points to liaise with COL. We have Focal Points in all your countries and they are immensely helpful. They will play a key role in converting this overall Plan into Country Action Plans.

Second, we much appreciate the voluntary contributions that you make to our budget. More than two-thirds of Commonwealth countries now support COL. We consider that financial support, at whatever level, is a vital sign that we are doing something useful for you.

I end by repeating that educational technology is revolutionary.

In these times of economic difficulty the only way to break out of the iron triangle and provide quality education to more people with less money is to harness the approaches to learning that I have described.

COL wants to help you do that. Thank you.