

COL in the Commonwealth: Promoting Learning for Sustainable Development



18 April 2018

Foreign Ministers Meeting
Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM)
London, UK

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Chair, Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, it is an honour to present my organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning as it completes 30 years of service to the Commonwealth.

It is a privilege to be here with the Chair of the COL Board of Governors, Dr Linda Sissons CNZM. We are very fortunate to have a Chair who brings to her role a wealth of experience and expertise in both education and skills.

COL was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met thirty years ago in Vancouver for CHOGM 1987. Ever since, we have been in beautiful British Columbia, which makes us the only Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation not in London.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to education and training.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

This aligns closely with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 which aspires to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

Our strategy is to harness the potential of existing and new technologies to achieve development outcomes. Let me demonstrate this with some examples of our work.

First, how has COL supported economic growth? COL's Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme is offered by universities in 11 countries. This quality distance learning programme enrolled over 30,000 learners, of whom 14,000 have already graduated. Raymond Loh, an alumnus of Wawasan Open University, Malaysia completed this programme in his early fifties and started a moving and relocation service which now has a presence in 40 countries.

A recent study conducted at the Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan indicates that the graduates of this programme saw an increase of 38% in their monthly income, increased their chances of promotion by over 28% and every \$ invested resulted in \$ 3.40 direct returns for the learners.

Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). All 31 small states are active members of this consortium. Small states develop needs-based courses collaboratively that are available as Open Educational Resources or OER not just to the members but to anyone anywhere in the world. 23 institutions in 14 countries are offering these courses.

As a result, tuition fees for the VUSSC students has been reduced by 69% as compared to students at a campus institution in Botswana. The majority of VUSSC learners combine work and study and by saving the opportunity costs are able to get more benefits than campus students.

Non-formal learning is equally important. These women in India have learnt agriculture and enterprise development skills using basic mobile phones. Every dollar invested has generated assets worth \$9.

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.

Two, how does COL's work support social inclusion? As countries achieve success in providing universal primary education, there are still significant barriers preventing many young people from entering secondary education. Open schools can provide flexible learning opportunities through the use of open and distance learning. These young girls go to a COL-supported open school in Belize where we found that every \$ invested resulted in \$ 8 worth of perceived benefits to students. As the Rt Honourable Boris Johnson said in a recent Spectator article: 'the single best and biggest thing that we can do for the world is to make sure that every girl gets 12 years of full-time education'.

Even today we find a wide prevalence of early child and forced marriage across the Commonwealth. COL is training girls and women in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania for employment and entrepreneurship.

In the last two years, more than 35,000 girls have been trained, nearly 7000 have new sources of income and over 400 child marriages have been averted. As a result of this training, the probability of being employed had increased by 50% and the income increased fivefold.

We know that not everyone in the Commonwealth has internet connectivity. To overcome this, COL developed Aptus a low-cost offline virtual classroom that provides learners in remote locations with access to digital resources. Aptus been deployed with effective outcomes in Pakistan, Kiribati, Samoa and Vanuatu and was presented to the Minister of Education, Tonga last week as a response to Cyclone Gita.

Third, what is COL's contribution to environmental conservation? Environmental sustainability is a central concern for everyone, particularly the small states. A recent study conducted in Botswana showed that the carbon footprint of a distance learning student was only one third compared to their campus-based counterparts.

Working with the Blue Economy Institute in Seychelles, COL supported the development of an online course in this emerging field which was offered free by the University of Seychelles last year.

COL worked with the National Teachers Institute, Nigeria, to develop a Green Teacher course to ensure that teachers inculcate environmental concerns amongst school children from an early stage.

These Excellencies are some examples of our work. Let me also share some highlights since the Malta CHOGM.

COL triennial Pan Commonwealth Forum was organized in partnership with the Open University of Malaysia, and attracted over 500 participants from 60 countries, including several Commonwealth ministers of education. This resulted in the 2016 KL Declaration which provides a clear roadmap of how distance and technology-based learning can lead to sustainable development.

COL is an acknowledged world leader in open educational resources and organized six regional consultations worldwide in collaboration with UNESCO, the government of Slovenia and Hewlett Foundation leading to the 2nd World OER Congress held in Ljubljana last September, where several Commonwealth ministers were present.

You'll be pleased to note that for 2015-16, we received an A++ rating from DFID for substantially exceeding expectations in outputs and outcomes. Over the past two years more than 370,000 learners have been reached, 50% being women. Over 110 institutions around the Commonwealth have adopted COL models and materials and we supported the development of over 2200 curricula and learning resources. How was this possible? By working with 280 partners in 42 countries and harnessing appropriate technologies.

We have given you a document entitled 'COL in the Commonwealth' which details what we have done in each of your countries over the past three years. We hope you are pleased with the results.

Honourable Ministers, as you have seen, COL works towards our common future by one, promoting 'learning for sustainable development'; two, supporting innovations for affordable and accessible technologies and three, serving the last person in the queue.

More than four fifths of the Commonwealth Member States make voluntary contributions to COL's budget. We consider this an important indicator of your confidence. Thank you for your contributions, both financial and intellectual, and for your kind attention.