

The Commonwealth of Education in the Caribbean: Past, Present and Future



Commonwealth Ministers of Education, MID-TERM REVIEW FOR CARIBBEAN/CANADA REGION OF COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS, Nassau, Bahamas, 28 July 2005

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Transcript

To begin, Minister, may I thank you for the wonderful welcome that you have given to us on our arrival in the Bahamas? You have made our coming very pleasurable and the kind hospitality and attention that I received yesterday seemed in no way diminished by the fact that I was wearing a T-shirt from Barbados because I had not yet had time to buy the local product.

This is my first visit to the Bahamas as president of the Commonwealth of Learning - indeed my first visit ever to the Bahamas. I have been looking forward to it for many reasons, not the least of which is the impression that I formed of your country when I was Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO before coming to COL.

For part of my time as ADG the Bahamas held one of the Caribbean seats on UNESCO's Executive Board. I remember that I always awaited eagerly the interventions from the Bahamas because they always contained important ideas and reflections couched in beautiful and mellifluous English by Davidson Hepburn.

Indeed, the countries of the English-speaking Caribbean always distinguished themselves in that forum by the quality of their speaking, which was and is a reflection on the strength of your educational traditions. Sadly, I never visited the Caribbean on business during my time at UNESCO but I have been making up for it at COL with visits to Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Jamaica early this year. I thank the Ministers from those countries for their very kind hospitality.

I intend to make other country visits in prospect later this year and in 2006, a year when this region will be very important to COL because, as you know, we are holding our major biennial event, the Fourth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in this region, in Ocho Rios, Jamaica at the end of October 2006. This is a joint effort of COL and the Caribbean countries and will involve our working closely with all your countries and many Caribbean institutions as we prepare to host the world at this event.

The programme for this Mid-Term Review gives me two opportunities to speak to you. This morning I shall talk about COL's work for you in general terms and go into more detail about our work in relation to the CCEM Action Plans this afternoon.

During the coming 2006-09 triennium COL will celebrate the 20th anniversary of its creation by the Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987. Although this is a respectable age, the world moves on and Ministers change, so it is worth recalling COL's basic purpose. To do so I will use common interrogative pronouns.

First, why does COL exist? Two trends converged in the 1980s. First, the mobility of students between Commonwealth countries was declining sharply just as new open universities were springing up around the Commonwealth. This created a simple idea: if the students can't move to the courses, let's move the courses to the students. The second trend was a growing belief that countries could benefit by harnessing technology to education and training at all levels.

At the 1987 CHOGM, Heads of Government established the Commonwealth of Learning. The key question that the Planning Committee had to answer recalls the Chinese proverb: would COL give people fish or teach them to fish? Would COL develop courses and programmes and offer them to Commonwealth countries or would it help countries to develop their own systems for using technology in education and training?

The Planning Committee chose the second option. COL would help countries use technology to strengthen their educational provision and facilitate learning for their citizens at all levels.

Is that purpose still valid? Some organisations solve the problem for which they were created and then close down. Others lose support as fashions change and their mission becomes less salient. However, all indications are that COL's mission is more relevant today than ever. Since I have started travelling for COL I have been amazed to find how prominent educational technology has become in the policy discourse of developing countries.

For example, in January I met President Obasanjo in Nigeria and President Kufuor in Ghana. Both are clearly convinced that technology holds many of the answers to the educational challenges their countries face. Strikingly, both leaders were supervising personally the national mechanisms that they have created to give effect to their conviction. This is a general trend. The policy soil in developing countries is more fertile than ever for COL's work.

Furthermore, developing countries themselves are beginning to assume the leadership in some large-scale

applications of technology to learning. A topical example for COL is open schooling. Many Commonwealth countries, especially the most populous ones, realise that even if they achieve universal primary education they will not be able to provide secondary education to more than a fraction of the population through conventional methods. Large-scale open schools, like the National Institute for Open Schooling in India, are therefore of great interest to them.

Second, what does COL do? What should it do in the future? Let's look at three dimensions. First, what are COL's outputs? Second, in which sectors does COL work? Third, how does COL operate? What are its distinctive characteristics?

Describing the outputs is straightforward. They are policy, systems and applications for the application of technology to learning in developing countries. In particular we urge countries to lay down policy before they harness technology to learning. Policy frameworks help to define the systems and applications needed. We are in the process of documenting the sharp increase, over the last ten years, in the number of Commonwealth countries that have such policy frameworks in place, whether for open and distance learning, for ICTs in schools, or for technology in education more generally.

Which sectors does COL work in? Which sectors should COL work in? Today we are putting a stronger focus on learning for development; notably in support of the Millennium Development Goals. By this we mean not only learning directly related to a particular MDG target but also learning that addresses the new challenges created when MDG targets are hit.

For example, the MDG target focuses on primary education. COL is helping the huge task of training and retraining primary teachers but we do not see a major role for ODL with primary schoolchildren. However, achieving the MDG for primary education will send a tidal wave of children towards secondary school. New approaches will be needed, which is why COL is helping open schools to improve and expand.

At the moment COL has activities in support of each of the eight MDGs: poverty and hunger; primary education; gender equality; the three areas of health; environmental sustainability and the global partnership. In the next Three-Year Plan we are thinking of grouping these into three broad sectors, which could be:

- Poverty eradication, agriculture and environment;
- Education, gender and literacy; and
- Democracy, good governance and health.

We should value your advice on where to put our energies in the next three years. I believe that our contributions in agriculture, environment and health are very promising and hope that you, as education ministers, will support our work with other departments.

My next question is how does COL operate? Whilst our cycle of activities necessarily reflects the same pattern as other agencies, I observe that COL has some special qualities.

Our first quality is concrete action. Recently a Minister of Education said to me, "what we appreciate about COL is that you are surgical". She then used a rather alarming metaphor from obesity treatment; saying that COL stapled your stomach whereas the big agencies put you on a diet.

This is linked to a second quality. COL is small and free of hierarchy. My colleagues can make decisions and act on them quickly. I give the example of visiting The Gambia in January. The Minister of Education wanted to prepare policies and structures for expanding and integrating ODL activities and asked COL to give the process momentum by organising a national forum to assist policy making and create capacity. We held that Forum in Banjul just three months later, in April, and the policy is now finished. Few other agencies could have acted so quickly. We are now accompanying The Gambia on its journey.

A third quality is that Results Based Management, which we adopted for the current plan in 2003, has sharpened COL's operational processes. Senior management do not micromanage. COL's specialists and their support teams work in an autonomous manner on a business plan approved after critical appraisal at the start of the year in July. We now have four progress meetings throughout the year and complete an outturn in April.

Speed reflects several other qualities. The fourth is the competence and experience of our staff. All of my colleagues command respect at senior levels in their specialist areas. They can assess a situation rapidly, provide good advice and then roll up their sleeves to make things happen on the ground.

The fifth quality, which has struck me as invaluable during my country visits this year, is the span of our contacts. Bigger agencies have directors-general who see heads of government, assistant directors-general who might call on ministers, directors who would talk to programme directors, and so on. COL makes these contacts with a single individual.

On some visits I meet the president or prime minister, spend time with other ministers, talk to heads of institutions, visit NGOs and also work with those responsible for COL activities in the field. Visits by my colleagues follow a similar pattern. They can be talking to the Minister of Education one day and addressing truckers about AIDS at a remote truck stop in the middle of the country the next.

Apart from using our time efficiently, the broad span of contacts that each of us makes helps both COL and the country achieve joined-up management. When we talk about COL as a catalyst for cooperation we often mean cooperation between the ministries or institutions within a particular country, not only between countries.

The obverse of the coin is that since the same individual hears a range of viewpoints we usually acquire a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of people and situations. My colleagues also believe - and their believing it helps to make it true - that COL represents development with a human face and development that hears the voice of the poor.

A final quality is our highly credible expertise. I refer not only to our staff, but to our expertise in Knowledge Management that has created our Knowledge Finder system and an Information Resources Centre that is the envy of other agencies. As a source of information about technology-mediated education COL is unrivalled.

Sometimes our work has impact solely within one country but often it engages the wider Commonwealth. We are very connected to the grassroots. Often I think that a particular combination of organisations could have worked together successfully without involving COL, but I have come to accept that the organisations themselves find that COL brings credibility, contacts and continuity to their enterprise.

The net result is that COL relies more than most other agencies on the work of ordinary local people. A corollary is a natural emphasis on South-South cooperation. For this reason I suspect, although I don't think we can yet prove, that our outputs are more self-sustaining. But our ambitions are higher than sustainability. In our Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme, for example, we aim not for sustainability but for self-replication.

Let me end with the questions who/whom and make brief comments in response to them. In posing the question, with whom does COL work, I shall only mention other intergovernmental agencies because I have already mentioned our partnerships with institutions and NGOs. We are putting increasing emphasis on making formal general agreements with other agencies, notably the UN agencies. I know that the Member States, which fund these agencies as well as COL, like to see us working together productively with them.

At the moment we are developing or renewing agreements with the World Health Organisation, UNESCO, the World Intellectual Property Organisation and an affiliate of the Food and Agriculture Organisation. In all cases the agencies and COL complement each other's work well.

We also work on programme matters with the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation. I am very optimistic about the future productivity of these relationships following Anne Keeling's appointment to the Secretariat and Mark Collins' appointment at the Foundation.

To the question 'who works for COL?' I answer that we have an extraordinarily good group of professionals. Many of you know them, and I hope you agree with this assessment. The simple point I make here is that like the Secretariat, COL is now operating a rotation policy that limits the time the people stay with us in order that we can have a regular circulation of staff from different countries. This means that I shall be writing to you regularly seeking your help in finding staff.

I have just written to you about a post for a specialist in Educational Technology Policy now that Vis Naidoo is going back to South Africa to head the MINDSET Network. I shall shortly be seeking your help with finding a vice-president of COL to succeed Brian Long. I thank you in advance for pointing good candidates in my direction.

I shall stop there and address COL's work on the Action Plans in more detail this afternoon.