

COL in the Pacific: Promoting Learning for Development

Video presentation

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COL in the Pacific - Promoting Learning for Development

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It is a pleasure to be ‘virtually’ present at this inaugural meeting of the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development or PACFOLD. This is an important event in the life of the Commonwealth of Learning.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to harness the potential of distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training. Our slogan is ‘Learning for Development’.

Following Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, we believe that giving people the opportunity to learn increases their freedoms ‘to be’ and ‘to do’ and helps accelerate progress towards achieving the international development goals and the Commonwealth values of peace equality, democracy and good governance.

In addition to placing our work within the context of internationally agreed development goals, we have a strong country focus and tailor our programme to suit the needs of Member States. We have an active network of Focal Points, nominated by Commonwealth Ministers of Education and this network identifies the priorities that COL can address. The Focal Points for the Pacific at their meeting in 2011, believed that COL should make TVET materials available; bring good practice to the region, provide technical advice in ODL and OER. Our next Pacific Focal Points meeting will be co-hosted by the Hon Minister of Education, Samoa at the end of September, where we hope to formally inaugurate PACFOLD..

As a result of the wide consultations in all the four regions of the Commonwealth, COL developed a strategic plan for 2012-15. Within this frame, COL has organised its work in two sectors: education and livelihoods & health. These two sectors have seven initiatives and two cross-cutting themes of elearning and gender. COL has identified five core strategies to implement its work: partnerships, capacity, materials, models and policies. As a small organisation, each of these strategies helps us to leverage our impact.

Let me give you examples of some of our activities in the Pacific.

As countries achieve success in providing universal primary education, there are still significant barriers preventing many young people from entering secondary education. COL works in 26 countries in expanding open schooling to increase learning opportunities for secondary education, particularly for girls, out-of-school youth, and people in remote regions.

In the Pacific, COL initiated its open schooling work by commissioning a 12 country report to identify the need for open schools. As a result, COL in collaboration with the USP supported the establishment of open schools in Tonga Kiribati and the Solomon Islands. COL has facilitated a twinning arrangement between the Te Kura Correspondence College, Wellington with Vanuatu Open School. The 22-country consortium of the Commonwealth Open Schools Association has six members from the region which include New Zealand and Australia.

One of the key obstacles to achieving UPE is the shortfall in teacher supply in most developing countries. Therefore COL provides support to teacher training institutions to strengthen and expand their programmes through the use of ODL and technology. COL's work in teacher education in the Pacific has focused on building capacity in Quality Assurance, Curriculum Development and MultiGrade teacher training.

Many Commonwealth countries in Asia and Africa are trying to improve participation in Higher Education. COL is using distance learning approaches to help achieve this. In the Pacific, COL's Legislative Drafting programme is offered through the Vanuatu campus of USP and COL provides scholarships for learners from the region.

Commonwealth Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for the small states, a network of 31 countries. Nine institutions, covering all Commonwealth regions are now offering VUSSC developed courses.

The first cohort of students of the sustainable agriculture course has graduated from the University of Samoa under the VUSSC arrangement and a common Transnational Qualifications Framework is in place. The NUS, UPNG, Vanuatu Institute of Technology and the Tonga Institute of HE are active participants of VUSSC. .

COL's work in skills development builds the capacity of institutions to offer new, flexible courses for people working in the informal sector, especially women. COL has developed courses in Basic Trades and in Vocational literacy and these are being used in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, PNG, Tuvalu and Nauru. A strategic plan for the TVET Division, Department of Education, PNG was supported by COL.

Working with the Ministry of Education, COL supported a training programme on working with concrete and 167 young people qualified to work with concrete as a result of this training.

Millions of farm families do not have access to learning in developing countries. COL offers a new approach called the Lifelong Learning for Farmers, or L3F. COL catalyses the links between the civil society, institutions and micro-finance institutions to develop multi-media

based learning. Such a linkage in which every agricultural borrower is also a learner has led to vibrant entrepreneurial behaviours among the poorer and marginalised communities.

Here are the participants of a recently initiated L3F programme in PNG.

The Healthy Communities initiative, helps local organisations to create non-formal educational programmes about community health and development. These photographs are of a learning programme called the Bag of Life in a district of Malawi with extremely high rates of maternal and child mortality. The community develops programmes in the local languages that reach thousands of learners resulting in health-seeking behaviours in the community.

Building on consistent advocacy and capacity building, the Isabel Province Government had accepted a proposal to support technology mediated learning through the Isabel Learning Network. Capacity building programmes in community health and development include participants from PNG; Kiribati; Solomon Islands; Vanuatu.

Our work in elearning cuts across all initiatives. In the Pacific, we have established a Chair in OER at Otago Polytechnic. The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand's Certificate in elearning reaches stakeholders in Africa and the Pacific, through COL support.

COL's Directory of OER has a consolidated list of open and free courses in HE, TE, skills development and secondary education that anyone can adopt and adapt. This is an important resources for teachers and learners.

Gender is another crosscutting theme that underpins COL's work. As we know, violence against women is a critical issue in several Pacific nations. Leymah Gwobee, the Nobel laureate from Liberia said that one way to stop this is to put more women in power.

Women hold just 21% of the parliamentary seats across the Commonwealth. In the Pacific, without including Australia and New Zealand, the figure drops to a mere 4 %. COL is in the process of discussing how to develop a multi-media leadership training course for women in the region.

COL approaches emerging technologies from the point of view of developing Member States. How can we reach students under this tree with quality learning materials?

Aptus or the Classroom Without Walls is one possible solution. It is developed by using readily available and low cost components, open source software and costs less than \$ 100.

Aptus does not require power from the mains. We can use solar chargers instead. It does not require any connectivity. We use a wireless router. All this enables teachers and students to access good quality digital materials through this device. As of now, learners can access the Wikipedia for schools containing over 6000 articles. Or the 2000 Khan Academy videos, covering topics relevant to learners in primary schools or high schools. A whole library of free books is also available. To supplement all this, local content can be generated and added quite easily. As Dennis Pack from Kiribati writes, 'I was very impressed with the speed at which the

resources loaded...if we add our own content, I can visualise the Aptus featuring as the main technology on many of our island primary and secondary schools’.

Finally, COL recognises the need to further strengthen its work in the Pacific. PACFOLD will be a key step in this direction. We are very grateful to the Vice Chancellor of USP Prof Rajesh Chandra for making this possible and to Mr Hansmukh Lal for his hard work and commitment. Let me also thank each one of you, who as members of the Advisory Group, will shape and guide the Centre to become a hub of world class expertise in distance learning and technology in the region. We look forward to working with you.

Thank you for your support.