

# Opening Remarks

24 September 2018

COL Focal Points Meeting –Africa and the Mediterranean Region  
Gaborone, Botswana



Professor Asha Kanwar  
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Honourable Minister; Distinguished Focal Points, Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure to be back in Botswana for the African and Mediterranean Focal Points meeting. We are very grateful to the Honourable Minister for agreeing to host the meeting and for making the time to be with us today. We also appreciate the support of Dr Daniel Tau, Vice Chancellor, Botswana Open University and our Focal Point, Fancy Amey, in organising this regional event. Thanks to each and every one of you for travelling long distances to be here. I am pleased to note that we have 14 Focal Points or their representatives from the 21 Member States in the two regions.

Botswana is a very important member of the Commonwealth and over the years has been a consistent supporter of COL. We were very fortunate to have had the Honourable Unity Dow, your former education minister representing Africa on our international Board of Governors. Thank you, Botswana, for your contributions, both financial and intellectual.

As you know, COL was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987 to help Member States institutions and organisations to expand the scale, efficiency and quality of learning through alternative approaches. Over our 30 years of service to the Commonwealth, we have constantly renewed ourselves to remain relevant to your needs.

Today, most governments are accelerating efforts to achieve SDG 4 which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. We need more trained teachers as only 62% primary teachers and 45% at the secondary level in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are trained. We need 12 years of free and compulsory education—Kenya offers this as of now—how can other countries make and meet this commitment? In spite of the high demand for tertiary education, the gross enrolment ratio still stands at less than 10%. If we need to increase the number of qualified teachers, have more children complete 12 years of schooling and increase the Gross Enrollment Ratio in tertiary education, we need innovative approaches and that is where COL has a role. The theme of COL's current strategic plan is 'learning for sustainable development.' COL believes that learning must lead to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. And this can be achieved at speed and scale by harnessing the potential of technologies.

As we are at the mid-point of our six-year Strategic Plan, we are organising four regional meetings this year. These Focal Points meetings are very important events in the life of COL, which is why you see four of us here. This is usually not possible as we have only a small group of specialists.

All the Commonwealth small states are members of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). The idea for VUSSC was proposed by Ministers of Education and COL was assigned the responsibility of implementing this initiative. It has been a powerful forum for connecting the Commonwealth and promoting Commonwealth collaboration. Dr Daniel Tau, Botswana, and Heroldt

Murangi of Namibia are members of the management committee. The small states develop and share needs-based courses and some of these relate to disaster management, business and entrepreneurship, sustainable tourism and agriculture. Please make full use of these free quality-assured resources, just as BOCODOL had done.

Recently, COL commissioned a study to compare the benefits of VUSSC distance learning students with their campus-based counterparts in the Bachelor of Business and Entrepreneurship programme in Botswana. It is significant that the students surveyed were first-generation university students. This shows that VUSSC is opening up access for tertiary education to those who had so far been outside its purview. The tuition fees of the VUSSC students was 70% less than that of the campus students studying the same programme. The same study concluded that the carbon emissions of VUSSC students were a third compared to that of campus-based counterparts. The National University of Lesotho, Open University of Mauritius, the universities of Seychelles and Swaziland and the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL), all offer VUSSC-developed courses.

In addition to this pan-Commonwealth initiative, COL has been making special efforts to deepen its work in each of your countries and this targeted approach is beginning to deliver results. In our host country Botswana, the primary focus is to support the Open University to develop strong systems and use COL courses to expand its portfolio of offerings. COL's Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA is offered by the Open Universities of Botswana, Nigeria and Mauritius. We are working with the Association of Commonwealth Universities to improve the quality of universities in Rwanda, and other East African countries.

COL's open school model is being implemented in Namibia, Mozambique and Zambia. As we know, 57% of upper secondary school youth age are not enrolled in schools in SSA. A study at NAMCOL showed that putting a learner through secondary school cost one fifth of what it costs to send the learner to a government secondary school in Namibia. Teacher training is equally important, and COL is working in Sierra Leone and South Africa to address the issues of teacher deficit and quality. With COL's support, the National Teachers' Institute, Nigeria, has launched the Green Teacher programme, which aims to help teachers inculcate environmental concerns among children from the early stages.

Skills development is a major priority for most Commonwealth governments and COL has adopted a two-pronged approach. One is to work with Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions to integrate flexible and blended learning to open up access to more people at lower costs. COL has 90 institutional partners across the continent and have developed successful models in Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya and Zambia. The second has been to work with civil society and deliver skills training for livelihoods, especially to girls and women in Tanzania and Mozambique. Talia Amisc from Mozambique dropped out of school in third grade and was forced to get married at the age of 13, and was a mother at 14—her dream of becoming a nurse was shattered. Thanks to COL's intervention, the family was convinced to allow her to develop skills to become a chef—she is now opening a small business to sell food on the beach.

COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers is a model adopted in 11 countries around the Commonwealth. This has lifted hundreds of thousands of farmers out of poverty and every dollar invested has yielded assets worth \$16 in India. This is being implemented in Tanzania and Malawi. Communities in the deep forests of Uganda learn scientific bee keeping techniques from experts in Makerere University through basic cell phones in their own local language. Within three years of the project, the families are able to afford two meals a day and send their children to school.

These are some examples of COL's partners and our work, which covers formal, non-formal and informal learning.

What do we hope to achieve at this meeting? Let me outline four key objectives.

One, we need to hear from you what your priorities are and how these can be addressed by COL.

Two, this is also an opportunity for us to present a summary of what we have done in your countries since 2015, and we have given you an interim report. The final report will be presented to Ministers of Education at the 21st CCEM.

Three, these face-to-face meetings are an excellent forum to remind you of COL's purpose, its organisation and its programmes. Since you are our ambassadors in the field, it is important that you know what we do.

Four, as a Commonwealth organisation, it is part of our mission to promote Commonwealth-wide cooperation. The Commonwealth is often referred to as a family of nations that works through consensus, respect and understanding. These meetings serve to remind us of our shared values and our common identity as citizens of the Commonwealth.

In addition, these meetings allow us to introduce our staff to you. We have a policy of rotation, under which old staff members leave, making way for new colleagues from other Commonwealth countries. Let me then introduce you to our Vice President, Dr Bala, Professor Mohee from Mauritius who leads our work in Higher Education and Dr Betty Ogange from Kenya our Advisor, Teacher Education.

Let me thank you all once again for your presence and for being COL's voice and visibility in the field. We are very grateful to the Honourable Minister and his team for their warm hospitality and support. Let me extend a warm welcome to each one of you.