

COL in the Commonwealth: Past, Present and Future



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Presentation to Senior Officials

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It is a pleasure to talk to you about the work that the Commonwealth of Learning is doing in support of each of your countries. I shall share this presentation with my colleague Professor Asha Kanwar, who was appointed Vice-President of the Commonwealth of Learning at the beginning of this year.

Our subject is COL in the Commonwealth: Past, Present and Future. We shall start by giving you some background on COL. Then we shall explain the thinking behind our Three-Year Plan for 2006-09, call simply Learning for Development. This is the Plan which COL presents for endorsement by the Ministers at this Conference.

The Plan gives the overall framework of our programme for the Commonwealth as a whole. But what matters most to each of you are the activities that COL will carry out in your countries over the next three years.

In order to ensure that those activities closely match the wishes and priorities of each government COL has substantially strengthened its mechanisms for linking with its stakeholders. Professor Kanwar has guided these developments and will tell you about them.

In order that you know the base from which COL is starting in your case, we have prepared reports on our activity in each country in the 2003-06 triennium. These have been brought together in the booklet, COL in the Commonwealth: Country Reports 2003-06, which has been provided to you.

The next step is to prepare a plan for COL's work in each country for the next triennium, 2006-09. Starting from the overall plan we have drawn up a country action proposal for each country. For some countries these have already been negotiated into agreed Country Action Plans. My colleagues and I hope

to complete this process with the remaining countries at this conference so that we shall have a complete set of Country Action Plans for 2006-09.

That's the framework of this report. Let me start with a few words about COL.

The Commonwealth of Learning is a Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation created by the Heads of Government at the Vancouver CHOGM in 1987 and supported by voluntary contributions from Member States.

It has its own Board of Governors with representation from around the Commonwealth, has its headquarters in Vancouver and a unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia. We have a total of 40 staff and the professional staff are recruited Commonwealth wide and serve on rotation. This small staff is supported by an extensive network of collaborators in all region and our aim is to have a focal point in each country. Professor Kanwar will say more about that.

COL's purpose is to help Commonwealth governments and institutions use a variety of technologies to improve and expand education, training and learning in support of development. We have a particular focus on open and distance learning, or ODL, because it has proven its cost-effectiveness in many countries. It gives you economies of scale, country-wide geographical reach, and flexibility.

A special project that we are coordinating on your behalf is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. The Ministers of Education conceived this idea at 14 CCEM and endorsed a proposal for it at 15CCEM. 26 Small States of the Commonwealth are now engaged in making this a reality. This was the subject of a lunch meeting yesterday and I shall say more in a minute.

COL's core budget comes from voluntary contributions from Member States. The six largest donors, with ex officio, seats on the Board, are Canada, India, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom. In the 2003-06 period we also had contributions from 27 other governments, for which we are most grateful. Our aim is to have all countries contributing because of the conviction that COL gives you good value. The purpose of all our planning is to give you that conviction.

Let me now comment on our new three-year plan which we are asking the Ministers to endorse at this meeting. It is called simply Learning for Development, because that is our business. Achieving the development goals, not just in education but also in health and hunger, is basically a matter of mass learning. Conventional methods of teaching and learning cannot cope with the scale of the learning challenge. COL helps you use technology to increase the scope and scale of learning.

The plan begins with a section called 'Looking Back' which reports on the tremendous growth of distance learning in higher education, in teacher training, in alternative schooling and in fighting poverty. A good example of this growth is the multiplication of open universities. From ten in 1988 the figure has grown to 23 and they enrol some 4 million students between them.

The Plan then looks forward to the future that we and you will be living in. We conducted the most intensive process of consultation and environmental scanning in our history. What were the key messages?

This is a young world and creating sustainable livelihoods for billions of young people is the key development challenge. It is a diverse world and a diverse Commonwealth. Tuvalu and India face different challenges. However, burgeoning technology can help us to complete the unfinished development agenda.

The feedback from the Commonwealth also underlined the development disaster that is HIV/AIDS, the importance of learning for women and the imperative of bridging the digital divide.

We also commissioned a formal external evaluation of our work in 2003-06. It told us that we should offer fewer programmes and continue them for longer; we must match your priorities with a programme, not a project focus; we must strengthen teamwork whilst taking full advantage of the tremendous skills and experience of our individual staff members; and we must always work in partnership.

We put together the plan to do just that. We consider development to mean the combination of the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All and the Commonwealth values of peace, democracy, equality and good governance.

This has led us to divide our activities into three sectors: Education; Learning for Livelihoods; and Human Environment.

In our activities and initiatives we aim for one or more of four outcomes. First, the longer COL exists, the more we are convinced that successful use of technology in learning depends on laying down a foundation of policy. Second, much of COL's work is capacity building to help systems that involve technology-mediated learning to work better. Third, we try to analyse our areas of work in terms of models. This helps us understand why something works and the ingredients of its success. It also helps in transferring the programme to a different country. Finally, although we do not develop materials ourselves, we help your institutions to produce them. COL then tries to get them more widely used across the Commonwealth.

Those are the outputs and outcomes we aim for in each of our initiatives. To keep it simple we have five initiatives in each of the three programme sectors. In Education we offer you help in Quality Assurance; Teacher Development; Open or Alternative Schooling; Higher Education; and eLearning for Education Sector development. These are the areas to which you attached most importance in the consultations that we carried out in developing the Plan.

Similarly, in the sector of Learning for Livelihoods we have first, Learning and Skills for Livelihoods, where the aim is to find ways of translating learning as directly as possible into improved livelihoods. Second, there is our Rural and Peri-Urban Community Development Initiative, which is our highly successful programme for improving the prosperity of farmers and villagers. Third, National and International Community Development refers particularly to working with the international organisations

in the agriculture sector to extend the use of technology mediated learning and our poverty reduction programme.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is housed in this sector so let me give you a quick update on that.

So far we have secured funds for the development of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth from two sources, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation of the USA, which is particularly interested in the way that the project is developing Open Educational Resources, and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation. The CFTC has allocated £ 1 million over four years as part of its policy of supporting human resource development in the Commonwealth.

A major use of these funds has been to hold planning, organisational and course development meetings as shown on this schedule. Although much of the work of course development will take place online and at a distance, we believed that to start the project going people needed to meet. At the meetings the representatives from your countries play one of two roles.

One is to be a link to your government and ensure that the VUSSC's planning reflects your priorities: we call these interlocutors. The other is to work on the development and delivery of courses: these are the implementers. Sometimes one person plays both roles but we see the roles as distinct.

One thing that it is important to get right is the subjects on which courses and programmes will focus. This list was the result of correspondence with governments back in 2004 and the planning meetings in Singapore last year and this year. As you can see the VUSSC is focussing on skills and livelihood related courses.

A very important milestone in the development of your Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth happened in August this year. This was the first course development meeting. It was held in Mauritius over three weeks and I thank the Government of Mauritius and the University of Mauritius for the splendid environment that they created. It was quickly nicknamed the 'Boot Camp' because for many participants it was a basic training in working online.

Participants were introduced to the ICT components of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, open source software, Wikis, and ePortfolios.

They created content on Tourism and Hospitality and on Small Business Management and I am delighted to report that in the time available they created three times as much material as we expected. This course development work is continuing with your colleagues contributing online from around the Commonwealth.

We were very impressed by how fast the participants picked up the skills and they are now providing buddy-training to their colleagues back in your countries. This illustrates what a useful tool the VUSSC will be in bridging the digital divide.

Let me conclude with a word on the roles of the various players in this exciting programme, starting with COL.

COL got involved with the VUSSC after 14CCEM in Halifax when Ministers conceived the idea and asked COL to work up a proposal with them. Since then we have coordinated the initiative; we have helped to create networks between countries; we have put all our considerable expertise in educational technology at the disposal of the participants; we have assisted in building local capacity; we have sought funds for the programme and invested some of COL's resources.

But it is important to understand what COL is not. COL is not a degree-awarding body. COL is not the Virtual University. Awards made as a result of VUSSC study will be made by institutions in your countries and we are working with you to facilitate arrangements for credit transfer and recognition of qualifications.

This is not COL's project, it is your project and your Ministries have a crucial role. It is to develop policy, so that this fits in with your national priorities; it is to liaise with other ministries, because some of the courses are of interest to them; it is to allocate people and responsibilities; it is to support and monitor the implementation of the programme. I think it is fair to say that the beneficial impact of the VUSSC will depend very directly on the extent to which you get your people engaged and have them take responsibility for it.

This must be done in close collaboration with your institutions, which will have the responsibility for linking into the international teams developing the courses and then adapting and delivering them in appropriate ways in your countries. They will also, as I just said, make the arrangements for students to get recognised awards for the courses and programmes that they study.

Finally, to return to the Plan, the final initiative in Learning and Livelihoods is Transnational Programmes, are the courses and materials whose use we facilitate around the Commonwealth. The best example is the Commonwealth Executive MBA and MPA programmes, developed jointly by the four open universities of South Asia and used by them but also now being adopted in Africa, the Caribbean and the South Pacific.

The final sector, which we shall develop further in the coming years, is Human Environment. The five initiatives are Gender and Development; Health, Welfare and Community Development; Environmental Education; Good Governance and the Educational Use of Mass Media and ICTs. The Plan includes more detail on what activities are included in these initiatives.

I emphasise that this framework for COL's action has resulted from intensive interaction with Commonwealth governments and institutions to find what your needs are. We intend to engage with you even more fully in implementing this new Plan and I invite Asha to say more about that.

I conclude by giving you the recommendations that the Board of Governors of COL is making to the Ministers:

First, that they endorse our Three-Year Plan for 2006-09: Learning for Development.

Second, that they note the progress in implementing the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

Third, that they agree to our target of attaining a budget of \$ Can 12 million within the period of the Plan.

It has been a pleasure to present COL's work to you. We are proud of what we are helping you to achieve in expanding and improving your education and training systems so that millions of people can learn their way to better lives.