Learning for Sustainable Development

COL’S IMPACT 2015–2021
References


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Executive Summary

The Commonwealth of Learning’s Strategic Plan 2015–2021 sought to leverage open and distance learning (ODL) and contribute to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal 4 by generating three long-term outcomes: better organisational capacity in ODL, increased opportunities for quality learning, and improved sustainable livelihoods. This report contains examples of impact from COL’s work during the plan period.

COL has successfully contributed to increasing institutional and staff capacity in ODL across all regions of the Commonwealth and in a wide range of areas, from supporting quality assurance in higher education to deploying models of open and innovative schooling in many countries. COL’s model for leadership in technology-enabled learning (TEL) and open educational resources has also had widespread uptake. As combating climate change is so critical for our futures, the Green Teacher Education programme has been mainstreamed in Africa’s most populous country using COL’s model. COL’s focus on small states of the Commonwealth has borne fruit in many areas, including Botswana’s pathway to an open university, and technical and vocational skills development through ODL in most regions.

Much learning takes place outside the institutional milieu. COL’s support for informal learning resulted in hundreds of thousands of farmers, especially women, acquiring skills to link livelihoods with finance. COL has developed a model of women’s and girls’ empowerment through skills training that has led to improved economic opportunities and agency. Specially designed activities leveraging technologies for persons with disabilities have provided new learning opportunities.

COL brought its strength in TEL and institutional development to support partners in preventing learning loss during Covid-19 lockdowns across the Commonwealth. Its convening power led to the formation of new alliances that offered skill development opportunities to hundreds of thousands of people, especially youths, who were particularly badly affected.

The full report elaborates on these themes through vivid examples.
Introduction

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), an intergovernmental organisation founded in 1987 by Commonwealth Heads of Government, helps developing nations improve access to quality education and training. COL’s mandate is to support governments and institutions to expand the scale, efficiency and quality of learning by using open and distance strategies and appropriate technologies. Institutions include not only formal education and training organisations but also, where relevant to needs and opportunities, non-governmental and civil society organisations.

Mindful of the continuing lack of access to quality education in many developing Commonwealth countries, which hinders growth and sustainable development, COL’s 2015–2021 Strategic Plan sought to contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The Plan prioritised education and training for women and girls and the promotion of open educational resources (OER). Many of the programming shifts under the Plan positioned COL as moving from a resource agency to an advocacy organisation, making the case for policy shifts and promoting the value of new approaches.

COL identified three long-term outcomes — or areas of impact — for the 2015–2021 strategic planning period.

These outcomes are interconnected, with improved organisational capacity — including within governments — leading to more and better learning opportunities, which enable people to pursue sustainable livelihoods. The examples of impact in Part 1 of this report demonstrate that much of COL’s work is focused on building institutional capacity through the development of policies, systems, staff capacity and curricula.

However, COL has long recognised that not all learning opportunities are provided by formal educational and training institutions, so an important part of its work is aimed at the development of skills outside the formal institutional sector, including in a lifelong learning context. Some of this sees COL taking direct action to fill gaps in skills provision, especially for livelihoods and the empowerment of women and girls. Many of the impact stories in Part 2 of this report flow from this side of COL’s work.
Long-term partnership

COL programming is implemented in Commonwealth countries by partners, some of whom have been working with COL for over ten years. COL has linkages with governments, particularly with ministries of education and human resource development, as well as many long-term partnerships with formal and non-formal educational institutions, including for higher education, vocational training, teacher training, and research, as well as non-governmental and community-based organisations, financial institutions, international agencies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), industry, and information and communications technology (ICT) organisations.

COL is providing leadership in non-formal learning, which is an important institutional shift.
MTR 2018

Some of COL’s partners have worked with it for several years and now have teams and individual champions with a breadth of capacity in ODL and OER, which should enable some countries to scale up impact using this institutional capacity.
Meta 2021

How COL works

COL is accepted and seen as a leader in ODL. It has the mandate, over 30 years of experience, a large repository of OER materials, tools and highly skilled international experts on staff and at the governance level. It has a senior management team that continually reads the contextual reality within the Commonwealth countries and regions where it works. COL has put in place processes to validate its understanding of context and priorities through regular partner meetings that bring together focal persons from across the Commonwealth along with key institutional stakeholders to share best practices and forge a vision of change. In addition, it has developed clear, results-based models for its ten core initiatives, which it tests, evaluates and improves on a regular basis. By learning, adapting and striving for high-quality performance, COL remains relevant. It has demonstrated its ability to build capacity in using technology to support formal and informal educational institutions and skills development programming as well as support policy development and institutional change. These are key enablers of success in its programming and results.
Meta 2021

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1 MTR 2018 refers to The Commonwealth of Learning Six-Year Plan: Mid-term Strategic Review of Programmes.
PART 1
Institutional Capacity to Leverage ODL
Supporting Institutions

Open and distance learning (ODL) provides institutions with new and more effective ways to offer learning opportunities, particularly to underserved communities and groups. COL supports a wide range of institutions to build capacity to leverage ODL, including technology-enabled learning (TEL). COL has created impact by forging strong partnerships with institutions and key ministries in countries where it works as an important enabler for achieving scale. COL’s responsiveness to Member States and to partner requests is an important part of maintaining strong partnerships. Some examples are provided in the following pages.

COL’s innovative approaches to teacher development, blended learning, and institutional capacity building in ODL, OER and TEL are at the cutting edge. Meta 2021
Environmental education in Nigeria

COL helped the National Teachers’ Institute (NTI), Kaduna develop and launch the Green Teacher Nigeria Project, a 12-month Advanced Diploma Programme in Environmental Education to address the rapidly growing need for professional development in this field, particularly in light of the climate crisis. Green Teacher recognises the role of teachers in tackling pressing local and global environmental issues. Enrolment in this programme surpassed 39,000 in 2021. The content has now been integrated into Nigeria’s National Certificate of Education 1 and 2 as part of the General Education Studies curriculum. Along with capacity- and skills-building workshops, COL provided support in designing OER and engaging in ongoing review of the programme content. COL also supported NTI to build capacity in pedagogies and technologies for the effective delivery of this environmental education programme. The model for the Green Teacher Programme was developed in 2005 by India’s Centre for Environment Education, with COL’s support.
Digital skills are a vital component in teachers’ toolkits, as the Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us. COL developed C-DELTA to support effective digital education by assessing competencies, developing learning materials around digital education skills, providing training opportunities for teachers, and monitoring student achievement and its relationship to livelihoods.

The Open University of Sri Lanka, a long-term partner with COL, began implementing the C-DELTA programme in Sri Lankan schools in 2018. The objective was to improve the teachers’ digital education skills and prepare them to become champions in their schools. These teachers then supported other teachers and students to learn digital education skills on the C-DELTA platform. To date, 1,918 teachers and students are registered in C-DELTA, from 86 schools and colleges. In addition, several departments at the Open University of Sri Lanka have also adopted C-DELTA as a non-credit course. About 38 per cent of the participants have successfully completed the course.

In South Africa, C-DELTA has been implemented through COL’s partner SchoolNet South Africa since 2019. By 2021, 4,798 students and teachers had registered on the platform, with a completion rate of 43 per cent. The South African Council for Educators accredited C-DELTA as equivalent to 35 Continuous Personal and Professional Teacher Development points.
Commonwealth Certificate for Teacher ICT Integration (CCTI)

The Commonwealth Certificate for Teacher ICT Integration (CCTI) is another of COL’s initiatives to support teachers in improving their use of ICT in teaching and learning. The CCTI has been developed to improve teachers’ experience teaching in the classroom using a range of ICT appropriately, and to increase school managers’ involvement in the ICT implementation process. It challenges school managers and teachers to constantly reflect on what they do in their schools and classrooms and how ICT can be integrated into their evolving management and teaching styles. The CCTI has been designed as a distance education course and is aligned with the UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers. It is an OER that COL is making available to teacher training institutions throughout the Commonwealth and beyond. The material can be used as is or can be adapted for existing programmes.

Mr Edward Ayo, a teacher at Dara Christian High School, in the Lira District of Northern Uganda, is one teacher benefiting from the training offered by the CCTI courses. Mr Ayo is a graduate teacher of biology and chemistry with 15 years of teaching experience. He says that his teaching style has been positively influenced by the CCTI training, and he is determined to “plan for and facilitate world-class lessons that guarantee effective learning.” Mr Ayo notes, “I have been able to identify and immediately put into use contemporary methods which, originally, I was very hesitant using. Examples include game-based learning and project-based learning.” He has seen increased student interest and better performance in science subjects. Mr Ayo has been inspired to pioneer projects that involve the integration of ICT in his school, and he is working with the school administration to improve ICT infrastructure and support training for staff to adopt various models promoted by the CCTI.
Flexible and blended approach to technical and vocational skills development

COL’s support for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) during 2015–2021 spans several of its initiatives. One of these — Technical and Vocational Skills Development — has had wide reach and impact, especially in Africa, where over 100 TVET institutions have been supported to build their capability in flexible and blended learning. Originally known as INVEST Africa, COL’s approach to promote the inclusion of learners in the informal sector has been holistic. Its impact has been felt in the institutional policy and strategy environment, organisational and technology infrastructures, learning and teaching practices, and access.

People working in the informal economy face many barriers to skills training. Thanks to collaboration with COL, Yaba College of Technology (Yabatech) has created a new Centre for Flexible Skills Development to spearhead and support the integration of flexible approaches to programme delivery for both formal on-campus students and non-formal courses for the local community. Twenty-six new non-formal courses aimed at increasing sustainable livelihoods are being made available as OER for sharing with other similar institutions. Tapping into informal apprenticeships, the centre creates new employment pathways for young Nigerians. In one project, the focus is on upskilling technicians for computer and mobile phone repair and maintenance, with a view to boosting their knowledge and helping them get formal recognition for their skills. The centre contributes to building learners’ hard and soft skills to make them more relevant to local labour markets. COL has also helped Yabatech develop OER for a blended workplace-online learning programme, and the college is building staff capacity to mentor other TVET institutes in blended learning. Informal associations from other industries have already reached out to Yabatech, wanting to upskill.
Another organisation to undergo substantial change with COL’s support is Koforidua Polytechnic, in Ghana. The polytechnic established an Institute of Open and Distance Learning with a staff of ten to support flexible skills development in campus-based programmes. This includes new radio lessons and the installation of the Moodle learning management system (LMS) to provide e-learning opportunities. They have 3,500 students benefiting from blended learning and 600 from distance learning. The institute also provides new courses for the informal sector. Their first enrolment, in 2015, offered training for 300 people.

Knowledge sharing among colleagues, including cascade training, has been a key element of COL’s strategy. The Africa Community Learning Network, formed with COL’s help, has more than 2,000 members. COL partner institutions in five countries went a step further in 2019, creating the African Foundation for Quality e-Learning for TVET. This professional association aims to “build a community of practitioners striving to increase access to quality TVET programmes at low cost to all through open, distance and e-learning.”
The Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute

One country that has benefited from COL’s initiative for small states is The Bahamas, where the Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute (BTVI) is now offering online and blended courses, with COL’s support. The Ministry of Education in 2020 acknowledged the importance of a project designed to build BTVI’s capacity for delivering quality online and blended programmes. The first phase of the project focused on developing and adopting quality assurance guidelines for ODL and integrating these into the institute’s existing quality assurance policy.

The second phase of the project built capacity among BTVI staff members to design, develop and facilitate online courses in the areas of IT, Mathematics, Reading, and Entrepreneurship, use OER, and develop tools for learner support and assessment in the online environment.

When Covid-19 threatened to disrupt face-to-face faculty training, the 22 instructors embraced the challenge. “It’s wonderful to witness so many driven and intelligent instructors bring their individual talents into such a collaborative setting,” said BTVI instructor Barbara Cooper, “especially for some that have never ventured into online learning.”

The end result has been rewarding. The creation of five blended courses for dual enrolment purposes throughout The Bahamas has offered an advantage to students who reside in the Family Islands. BTVI President Dr Robert Robertson stressed the importance of the shift: “Online learning and distance learning are flexible, convenient ways to gain access to higher learning. Being on an island shouldn’t be a barrier to higher education. We live in a new era of learning. Technological advances are proceeding at a rapid pace, and we at BTVI are prepared to keep stride.” Indeed, BTVI is increasing its stride — in partnership with COL and Lakehead University, Canada, it is currently engaged in developing a suite
of online micro-courses designed to upskill local youth workers. Faculty leads trained in the initial project are using their experience to provide support for other colleagues and deliver short training sessions.

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**BOCODOL/BOU and COL — a special relationship**

The trajectory followed by Botswana Open University (BOU) and its predecessor, the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL), over the last two decades demonstrates the value of the type of long-term, multifaceted relationship that has been a feature of COL’s work in recent years.

The inauguration of BOU in November 2017 was the result of a transformation process involving BOCODOL, set in motion by a Presidential Directive of 2011. The transformation followed a recommendation in the Tertiary Education Policy that a comprehensive national distance education institution be established, in line with Botswana’s Vision 2016, which highlighted the need for a massive expansion in higher education provision. BOU offers programmes in Education, Science and Technology, Business and Management Studies, and Social Sciences. It continues to offer school equivalency programmes as well as vocational and professional programmes up to and including the postgraduate level. BOU currently has 7,000 active students and saw its first graduation of nearly 2,400 in November 2021. It has five campuses — in Gaborone, Francistown, Palapye, Maun and Kang — each providing learner support.

COL has been a partner from BOCODOL’s earliest days to its transition to BOU and beyond. In 2005, BOCODOL...
agreed to host the Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE), established by COL, which continues to be a resource for the region. The centre provides capacity-building programmes and services for effective and efficient management of ODL institutions within the SADC countries and is a repository of information, materials and expertise for these institutions. Dr Daniel Tau, former Chief Executive Officer of BOCODOL and now Vice-Chancellor of BOU, has acknowledged that SADC-CDE’s status as a centre of excellence in ODL helped BOCODOL’s profile and supported its case to become a tertiary ODL institution. SADC-CDE continues to work closely with BOU; it is currently arranging monthly webinars for ODL senior practitioners and leaders — averaging about 55 participants — across the region, each month being hosted by a different country partner.

Another context in which COL and BOCODOL/BOU have collaborated is with the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). As Director of BOCODOL, Dr Tau was a founding participant in VUSSC as Botswana’s interlocutor and has been Chair of the VUSSC Management Board since 2016. From the start, Dr Tau saw the advantage of collaborative course development and sharing for small states, and BOCODOL was, in his words, “an aggressive implementer” of VUSSC programmes.
Once BOCODOL formally embarked on the journey to becoming an open university, COL stepped in to help. Between 2015 and 2017, COL provided BOCODOL with consistent support to plan the transformation, with technical advice in areas ranging from structures and systems to culture.

Following BOU’s inauguration, several of its degree programmes had their genesis in work carried out in partnership with COL. The Certificate in Disaster Management and the Bachelor’s in Business and Entrepreneurship, both developed with COL’s support, continue to be popular open programmes. An evaluation study carried out in 2019 confirmed that the latter had positively affected the lives of both instructors and graduates, and that the introduction of OER had reduced the cost of study materials by more than 50 per cent. The Special and Inclusive degree programme, offered for the first time by distance in 2017, was developed with COL’s help. This support made special education OER content available and strengthened capacity among teacher education staff to design, develop and facilitate special education courses online.

With COL’s support, BOU in 2019 developed a Strategy for Technology-Enhanced Learning. Dr Tau said that “through the implementation of that policy, we were able to very easily introduce online education blended learning.” This was timely because it enabled BOU to keep its programmes alive throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, BOU opened up online access to its programmes globally, including some of the COL–Coursera MOOCs described elsewhere in this report.

“COL is a very responsive partner,” said Dr Tau. “They are interested in advancing the frontiers of ODL, not just in the Commonwealth but globally, too.”

**National University of Samoa**

Since its establishment in 1984, the National University of Samoa (NUS) has become one of the key institutions helping the country meet its human resource needs. From its small beginnings (only 45 students in the University Preparatory Year), it has grown in leaps and bounds, with NUS graduates now accounting for approximately 80 per cent of the Samoan workforce. NUS offers a wide range of certificates, degrees and diplomas, all the way to master’s and PhD programmes.

NUS and COL have a long history of successful collaboration, with COL supporting NUS to institutionalise TEL, the key focus being policy development and capacity building for integrating technology in teaching and learning. In addition to a series of workshops, COL has assisted the university with setting up an open-access repository to offer blended learning courses. NUS is an active member of VUSSC and played a key role in developing the VUSSC Postgraduate Diploma in Education. COL has also worked with NUS to ensure that some of its
programmes and qualifications — such as the Diploma in Sustainable Agriculture for Small States — are registered on the Transnational Qualifications Framework.

Most recently, COL and NUS have partnered to provide additional educational opportunities to those disadvantaged by the Covid-19 pandemic. This partnership led to a highly effective and rapid deployment of the Moodle LMS across the university during the lockdown in 2020. Over the next three years, up to 900 individuals, including youths, women, girls, and persons with disabilities, will gain free access to high-quality skill-development courses offered by COL in partnership with the world’s leading e-learning providers. This will help reskill and upskill Samoan citizens in high-demand areas, including large-scale agriculture, tourism, manufacturing, and social services. NUS’s collaboration with COL is an integral part of the post-pandemic “reset,” aimed at further strengthening the university’s capacity.

**SNDT Women’s University, India**

Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women’s University (SNDTWU) in Mumbai, India developed a TEL policy with COL’s support in 2016. The policy’s vision is to enable the university to commit and put in place appropriate technologies and resources to assist students and teachers in creating an environment of excellence in learning and teaching. COL has continued to support SNDTWU with capacity building and curriculum development. A large number of blended courses were developed for over 4,000 students. The Covid-19 pandemic then forced the university to pivot to online delivery, which they achieved with COL’s help.
Dr Nilesh Thakre, Associate Professor and Head of the university’s Department of Psychology, who was trained at COL-supported workshops, said, “I was equipped to teach my students using a blended learning approach and to use Moodle as an LMS. . . . My students like the concepts. It was found to be more interesting, and it helps them retain learning and understand concepts with ease. I have also encouraged other faculties from SNDTWU, and they have shown interest and adopted TEL in their teaching.”

Trans-institutional Assets

As well as working with specific institutions to provide multifaceted support, COL also collaborates in developing assets such as models, new curricula and quality assurance mechanisms, which can be used by multiple institutions across regions and the Commonwealth.

Open schooling model in six countries

COL frequently works with schools as part of its national-level engagement. For example, between 2018 and 2021, COL provided support for ministries to pilot its Open and Innovative Schooling (OIS) model in six countries — Belize, Malawi, Mozambique, Trinidad and Tobago, Vanuatu and Zambia — where the model is being implemented in 95 schools or adult education centres. The National Institute of Distance Education, Mozambique recently (2021) reported that “between 2018 and 2020, 15,675 learners (7,633 females) were supported through the OIS model, with 6,895 learners (3,253, or 44%, females) passing one or more subjects.”
Quality assurance in East Africa

COL has supported 23 higher education institutions in four East African Commonwealth countries to advance quality assurance (QA) in blended learning, through its role in the four-year Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL) project, funded by the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. PEBL, which came to an end in March 2022, sought to enhance the quality, relevance, scale, accessibility and affordability of higher education in East Africa. The partnership included the Association of Commonwealth Universities, COL, the Commission for University Education (Kenya), the Staff and Educational Development Association (UK) and the University of Edinburgh, working with a total of 23 universities in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda.

Prior to PEBL, weak QA systems were a key factor inhibiting the development of blended learning and reducing the number of blended modules/courses likely to be approved. COL has been responsible for developing and strengthening QA systems within the participating universities to robustly assure the quality of blended learning courses. In addition to organising capacity-building workshops and developing two online courses on QA for blended learning within an African context, COL produced two resources: the Guide for Implementing a QA Institutional Review Tool for Blended Learning, and the QA...
Rubric for Blended Learning. Using the QA Institutional Review Tool, QA teams from the 23 institutions carried out institutional reviews, leading to improvement plans.

The QA rubric has been widely adopted, not only by institutions within the PEBL project but also by others inspired by its example. According to Dr Mildred Ayere of Maseno University, one of PEBL’s target institutions, 90 per cent of Kenyan universities have adopted the rubric. “The biggest factor was the collaborative approach to its development,” she noted. Kenya’s Commission for University Education has used the QA Rubric as one of the reference tools to develop self-assessment reports for open distance e-learning programmes in the country.

The external evaluation of PEBL (2021) stated: “All the teachers from across the network who were interviewed have familiarised themselves with the QA Rubric. In many institutions, this appears to have become a foundational tool in the formulation of blended learning courses. One respondent commented that they now have ‘an instrument to use for looking at our modules in every department.’” The evaluation concluded: “The successful implementation of the QA Rubric across the network will provide an effective basis for blended learning modules to be quality assured in the future.”

Management and public administration education

The Commonwealth Executive Master of Business Administration and Master of Public Administration (CEMBA/CEMPA) programme is the outcome of an initial collaboration between COL and four open universities in South Asia: Allama Iqbal Open University (Pakistan), Bangladesh Open University, Indira Gandhi National Open University (India) and the Open University of Sri Lanka. Established in 2002, the programme is now expanding through partnership with institutions in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. CEMBA/CEMPA was designed to help open universities in the Commonwealth meet the social and professional requirements for management and public administration education at the postgraduate level. Key features are affordable access, a flexible and distributed learning mode, flexible credit transfers across the partner institutions, and learning materials developed by highly qualified and experienced subject-matter specialists from across the Commonwealth.

Impact studies carried out during 2019–2021 have shown that the programme noticeably improves graduates’ livelihoods. In Bangladesh, graduates were able to increase their monthly income by 31 per cent. In Pakistan, CEMBA/CEMPA graduates had a 28.5 per cent better chance of making it to a managerial position and had an average increase in annual income of 32 per cent.
Over a period of almost 20 years, COL supported the development of institutional capacity, and the CEMBA/CEMPA programme has been mainstreamed in 11 open universities around the Commonwealth.

Education for youth work

While 60 per cent of the Commonwealth’s population is aged 29 or under, many states suffer disproportionately from a lack of trained youth work practitioners to meet their distinct challenges. The Commonwealth Higher Education Consortium for Youth Work (CHEC4YW), a partnership of COL, the Commonwealth Secretariat, and The University of the West Indies, was established to address this gap by making the learning materials of a Youth Work degree available to partner institutions as OER and building their capacity to offer it in online and blended delivery modalities. Currently, 17 universities from 15 Commonwealth countries are implementation partners.

One such institution is the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL). Having participated with institutions from Botswana, Malawi and Uganda in the initial CHEC4YW technical workshop held in May 2019, NAMCOL sought COL’s support to increase their pool of online course developers and facilitators. As a result, 23 modules comprising the Bachelor of Arts in Youth and Community Development will be available on their e-learning platform by mid-2022. This will lead to expanded access to online programmes for practising
and aspiring youth workers in Namibia and surrounding countries. NAMCOL Programme Developer Imogene Hilukiluah is resolute about the need for youth workers to have professional qualifications, and she considers the programme’s shift to online delivery and the use of OER key because they reduce the financial barrier that many small states face, while increasing accessibility for learners. She sees the advantages first-hand, noting that students do not have to travel long distances or purchase expensive textbooks to study. Student Oliver Mhuriro echoed this sentiment, acknowledging that about 80 per cent of those in his class worked full-time, so they benefited immensely from the distance education model. As a seasoned youth worker, Oliver knows the potential for youths to drive change and is emphatic about the need for the youth work sector to be professionalised. He believes doing so will “help the government alleviate or manage the social issues that youths are facing” and, by extension, foster significant economic benefits.

National Policies and Strategies

COL’s work with institutions aligns with national policies and planning. COL also supports governments to develop policies for ODL, OER and ICT in education, often in concert with support in other areas.
In discussion with the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Gender Relations and Sustainable Development, COL initiated the process of developing an ICT in Education Policy and Strategy in Saint Lucia in 2017. Simultaneously, COL started building teachers’ capacity and promoted the use of the C-DELTA platform, OER training, and the Moodle LMS. In 2019, the Cabinet adopted the ICT in Education Policy and Strategy. The ministry has since then implemented several innovative online initiatives, including the development of school textbooks as OER using Moodle. To date, 286 students and teachers have successfully competed C-DELTA.

Over a period of three years, COL worked with partners in Malaysia, especially the Universiti Malaysia Sabah, to support the Ministry of Education in developing a national policy on inclusive OER. The policy was launched in a virtual event by the Minister of Higher Education in December 2021, where COL’s role was acknowledged.
PART 2
Beyond Formal Institutions
Lifelong Learning for Farmers

A substantial portion of the population in developing Commonwealth countries depends on agriculture for food and livelihood security. However, the agricultural sectors in most of these countries have continued to record a steady decline. One of the major reasons is inadequate human resource development. Many countries still follow the conventional one-way extension model, which demands a greater infrastructure and resource base than what most developing countries can afford. The situation is aggravated by the low ratio of extension officers to farmers in most countries.

COL believes that capacity building can only help improve farmers’ livelihoods when it is linked to social capital in the form of mobilised farmer groups and financial capital in the form of credit. The Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) programme has applied this approach in a wide variety of contexts since 2006. L3F is a holistic model that emphasises continuous learning among farmers using ICT, horizontal and vertical learning, and networking with stakeholders. COL’s ability to broker partnerships is a key strength: the L3F model links stakeholders with microfinance, agricultural extension workers and agricultural supply chains.

Stakeholders invest their incomes in children’s education, better food and improved housing, as well as increasing their assets and diversifying their income-generating activities, which multiplies development impact.

COL’s ability to identify effective partners within the agriculture sector is a strength. Interviews with the Government of Ghana and COL partner institutions show the opportunity to go to scale, as the Ministry of Food and Agriculture is considering rolling out the programme across the three northern regions.

Meta 2021
More than 600,000 L3F participants, mainly women, are learning through mobile phones. Courses over mobile phones have strengthened their savings, credit management and enterprise activities. One of the key success points has been that the mobile technology and educational messaging uses local languages and reaches large numbers of people, many of whom are illiterate or semi-literate.

A study by India’s National Institute of Bank Management showed that L3F yielded a return of INR 9.00 to the community for every INR 1.00 spent on facilitating and implementing the initiative.
Kenyan youth becomes community mobiliser

With just primary-level education, Pius Oduor Ongaro had struggled to support his family of five. A welcome break for this 32-year-old came through an initiative facilitated by COL in his native Siaya county, Kenya. An acquaintance told Pius about the benefits of joining a seed savings and credit co-operative organisation (SACCO). Through Siaya Seed SACCO, Pius received training in financial literacy and was able not only to improve his livelihood but also to discover his leadership potential. He set up a self-help group in his village to promote poultry and other agricultural livelihood enterprises. The group now has 40 members, the majority of them women, and some are living with disabilities. All group members have expanded their knowledge through the training and have been able to access credit. They are working together to breed chickens and grow vegetables for sale to hotels and restaurants. They were able to keep the business running during Covid-19, and some members earned enough money to pay for their children’s schooling. “With COL’s support, Pius has become a true community mobiliser and role model to other youth,” said Evans Martine Owiye, a Siaya Seed SACCO business officer who facilitates financial literacy. “We greatly admire his commitment to involving all generations in learning and enterprise development.”
Improved livelihoods for mushroom farmers in Sri Lanka

COL’s L3F project and the University of Ruhuna worked together to support and enhance the livelihoods of over 800 mushroom farmers in the Matara and Hambantota districts of southern Sri Lanka. The project used blended learning approaches to raise the social well-being and income level of mushroom cultivators, more than 60 per cent of whom were women. They were offered training through monthly face-to-face sessions at the university campus and regular voicemail messages on a range of topics related to mushroom cultivation and business development, which were disseminated through Mobitel’s mobile learning platform. As a result, participating farmers have been able to significantly increase their mushroom yield for the local and export markets. A key aspect of this project is to link farmers to local financial institutions so they can obtain credit for scaling up operations. In a span of 12 months, farmers accessed approximately LKR 2,000,000 (USD 13,000) to grow their businesses. COL supported the University of Ruhuna in areas such as project implementation and monitoring and evaluation, as well as providing strategic direction to help scale up the project.

L3F women in India launch the Theni Producers Company

A community of women goat herders in Theni District in the state of Tamil Nadu, south India launched their own company in 2015 after receiving training in goat farming and business management through L3F. Using mobile phones, community members received voicemail messages with information to help them achieve higher productivity in goat rearing through better breed selection, feed, health management and animal care. In 2013, the women began contemplating forming their own company to eliminate the need for a middleman and enable them to retain more of the profits of their work in their own community. With
the support of Vidiyal, a non-governmental organisation, and India’s National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, the Theni District Goat Farmers Producer Company was registered under the Companies Registration Act in September 2015. The company operates with funds raised from members’ shares and is run by a board comprising ten directors (nine women and one man). In the year 2020–21 the annual turnover of the company was INR 4,021,432 (about USD 60,000). The company also created its own assets, such as a seed processing unit (worth about USD 130,000), with a grant provided by the State Farmers Agri-Business Consortium. For the last five years, the company has paid dividends to its shareholders totalling about USD 8,000.

Supporting Persons with Disabilities

As part of its work to promote disability inclusion and equality, COL has developed two short online courses for service workers, teachers and volunteers who work with persons with disabilities (PWD): Introduction to Disability Needs Assessments and Introduction to Assistive Technologies. The first offering, in partnership with the Global Rainbow Foundation, Mauritius, brought together 42 teachers and disability practitioners from institutions across Mauritius, including three PWD. At the end of the 12 weeks of training, participants were able to select and use appropriate and accessible technologies to help PWD overcome specific barriers in education and workplace settings.
One teacher who has benefited from the courses offered in Mauritius is Emily Favory. Emily describes the challenge of working with a student in her class who faced speech difficulties: “When I began working with Tessa a year ago, she was barely speaking in the classroom, more often just mimicking conversations . . . she was more or less simply repeating my conversation.” The Assistive Technologies course introduced Emily to a variety of assistive tools, and she chose an app called @Voice to help Tessa increase her ability to communicate and build her confidence. By using the text-to-speech assistive tool, Tessa is able to scan words or phrases from a book and have the app “read” them back to her, a process designed to improve her recognition and comprehension. Emily has gone further to combine use of the app with a phone and projector, supplementing the effects of the technology and making its use more enjoyable for Tessa.

Since the initial offering in Mauritius, the courses have been offered in Tonga, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, to 35 disability educators. Malia Niukapu Sio, Senior Lecturer and IT Co-ordinator at the Tonga Institute of Higher Education, explained that as a result of the course, participants understand the bigger picture of how assistive technologies can support PWD to become more independent, build self-esteem and reduce their anxiety and stress; she noted that many began implementing assistive technologies at work even before the course was finished. The courses are currently also being offered in Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Seychelles.

Supporting Vulnerable Youths

COL has been working with the youth-based organisation Kampabits, in Uganda, to equip vulnerable and unemployed youths with life-changing skills. A total of 277 young people, including 184 women, have so far been trained in developing advanced ICT skills. Of these, 216 have received job opportunities or started their own enterprises using the skills earned.

In 2019, Banura Sheena was one of the successful learners who landed a job as a programmer in Design Hub Kampala. She says, “I never knew anything about programming
Overworked and underpaid, Robert Kaggo from Kampala joined the programme in 2020 to boost his self-esteem by learning advanced graphics and web design. He says he got his first client even before completing the training and has now started an advertising company, where he designs company logos and websites.

Another learner, Mutyaba Denis, did not have any computer skills when he first enrolled in the programme. Having learned coding and graphic design, he is now interning as a front-end developer at Tunga, a staff augmentation firm that works with African software developers. Mutyaba plans to start his own coding company.

GIRLS Inspire

GIRLS Inspire is a long-term COL project initially funded by the governments of Canada and Australia to provide schooling and skills development through ODL to some of the world’s most vulnerable and hard-to-reach girls. The project aims to end the cycle of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and to address the barriers that prevent women’s and girls’ economic participation, such as early marriage, cultural norms, distance from schools, or environmental factors such as monsoons. Community organisations in Bangladesh, India, Mozambique, Pakistan and Tanzania are mobilised to leverage the power of ODL to end CEFM and address other barriers that prevent girls’ economic participation. GIRLS Inspire adopts a holistic approach to empower women and girls by creating awareness about their human rights while also providing skills training.
Floating schools bring education to students’ doorsteps

Every year, one third of Bangladesh experiences floods during the monsoon season. For families living in flood-prone areas, this can prevent children from accessing education. COL has partnered with Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha (SSS) to combat this problem with something that leverages the situation to its advantage: boats. SSS uses fleets of solar-powered library and training boats to bring education to girls and young women and raise awareness about their right to education, their choices and opportunities, domestic violence, disaster preparedness, and preventing CEFM. The boats are equipped with books, Internet-linked laptops, multimedia equipment and educational presentations. While docked at villages, the boats are also venues for evening shows to raise awareness about girls’ rights and other human rights issues.

Pakistani woman breaks down disability barriers

Madhia is a 25-year-old from Pakistan who comes from an underprivileged family and has a physical disability caused by polio. She has always wanted to gain an education, but her father, a daily wage labourer, could not support her dreams. Through a friend, Madhia learned about life-changing opportunities offered by COL’s GIRLS Inspire initiative. Madhia successfully completed courses in dressmaking and in basic life-skills education. She praises the programme for helping her break down barriers and gain financial independence. She has opened a dressmaking centre in her home, and the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child has facilitated her gaining a loan from the Akhuwat Foundation to support her business venture.
Empowered woman becomes community role model

Until Rumeisha became involved with COL, she would rarely leave the house. This young woman from a village in Sri Lanka was raised in a traditional culture and would manage her day-to-day life with a minimal income brought in by her husband and occasional sewing orders. A crucial break came after she met with a representative from the Women’s Development Centre, COL’s partner in Sri Lanka. Rumeisha was invited to participate in a training programme aimed at developing women’s livelihood and business skills. She was able to build self-confidence and obtain skills that allowed her to become a sewing instructor for the Industrial Development Board in her village. Rumeisha is proud that she was able to “find herself” with support from COL. Despite pandemic-induced disruptions and being pregnant with her second child, she has been determined to succeed. In 2020, she started a sewing class for women from her community. Twenty-five of Rumeisha’s students are now selling quality garments locally.
PART 3
COL’s Response to Covid-19
At the beginning of COL’s 2015–2021 strategy, few would have predicted how reliant the world would become on flexible, distance and technology-based education and skills development on account of a pandemic. By the end of the Strategic Plan period, COL not only had shown how its traditional support for these approaches was an invaluable contribution to surviving the emergency but also had responded with new modes for reaching hundreds of thousands of people, many of them particularly vulnerable to the disruption. Children from poor families, especially girls, as well as persons with disabilities have suffered most from the pandemic. As an intergovernmental organisation committed to reaching “the last person in the queue” with quality education and lifelong learning, COL recognised the need for innovative approaches that combine the power of technology with inclusion. COL was quick to provide targeted responses aimed at narrowing the divide between the “haves” and “have-nots.”

The pandemic has been marked by tremendous losses and disruptions and has widened inequalities. But it has also created new opportunities, notably in the area of remote learning. As the world pivoted to online and distance learning, open education gained greater acceptance. What would have taken years of advocacy happened within a matter of months. For COL, open education means policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. Throughout the pandemic, COL has supported Member States to remove these barriers and address the needs of the underserved.

A few important lessons have surfaced along the way. Open schools are a viable means to ensure the doors of learning stay open. COL has been promoting this distance learning model for secondary education. Not only did open schools remain open during the pandemic, but they were also able to provide printed course materials to students at regular schools in several countries — for example, in Botswana and Namibia. As Covid-19 forced governments to cut back on resource allocations for education, there was a growing need for cost-effective solutions to bring quality learning to all. OER emerged as a way forward, helping bridge the divides and enable the marginalised. COL launched the Pacific Regional Channel, containing over 960 OER, to support the curriculum needs of Pacific Island states.

As countries closed borders to contain the virus, open collaboration became essential to support current needs and build resilience for the future. COL’s OpenDoor partnership attracted more than 60 organisations, institutions and associations across the world, becoming a vibrant platform where partners have shared over 260 courses.

Open education is critical for sustainable development. It empowers learners to access quality opportunities for economic growth, participate in the process of effecting social change, and contribute to environmental conservation. Leaving no one behind requires full commitment, well beyond the pandemic. Over the past two years, it has become increasingly clear that “business as usual” no longer works, and that technologies suitable
for different contexts will have to become part of “the new normal.” With its mandate to promote distance learning, COL is well placed to help Member States use the opportunities offered by distance education to build back better.

In light of the current Covid-19 crisis, many partners will need additional help to sustain the benefits of COL programming. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problems by closing educational systems and in some cases slowing down the race towards ODL and OER utilisation due to capacity constraints. The key lesson for the next six-year plan is to redouble efforts to scale up the reach and accessibility of programming to help provide quality education for all. COL has to continue building the proof of concept for initiatives in order to attain the expected scale and impact needed in more countries and put in place sustainable structures within these country contexts.

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Examples of COL’s Response to the Pandemic

- The COL–Coursera Workforce Recovery Initiative is being offered in collaboration with ministries across the Commonwealth. Through the programme, hundreds of thousands have gained free access to 5,000 courses taught by highly reputed professors and mentors from top universities and companies around the world. For many, this was a pathway to regaining employment lost due to the pandemic. In Guyana, online course enrolments involved 10 per cent of the country’s population in the 15–35 age group, and the credentials earned will be recognised for employment purposes.

- In response to requests from ministries of education in the Pacific and Caribbean for support in training teachers to move online as a result of school closures, COL, in partnership with the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development, developed and offered a short online course called Using Open Educational Resources for Online Learning: An Introduction, which has contributed to learning continuity with its contemporary learning design and emphasis on peer engagement. Ministries in Fiji and Trinidad and Tobago, who partnered with COL to offer the course, requested all teachers nationwide to enrol in the training. In fact, across the three iterations — one focused on the request from Fiji and two focused on the requests from Trinidad and Tobago — some 11,568 teachers and others participated.

Johnstone Muruka (Kenya) is an environmentalist and entrepreneur who has taken 18 online courses after joining the COL–Coursera Workforce Recovery Initiative. The skills and knowledge he gained helped him develop his own environmental business to make cleaner living spaces by converting everyday waste into sustainable fuel, as recommended in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. Johnstone was nominated for an award for youth-led business initiatives that mitigate the consequences of Covid-19.
• In India, COL supported the training of 5,000 women in digital skills for entrepreneurship, leveraging the potential of basic phones to ensure they could find new ways to sustain their businesses.

• COL, in partnership with the Sierra Leone Teaching Service Commission, brought together in-service training providers to formulate a national framework and guidelines for the continuous professional development of teachers to ensure they had the skills and competencies to respond to educational disruptions due to Covid-19.

• Covid-19 has challenged progress towards gender equality in the world of work. In an effort to help young women and girls become successful in their field of interest and build future generations of leaders, COL launched CommonwealthWiseWomen. This new mentoring programme offers unique networking opportunities to women and girls in underserved communities across the Commonwealth. By pairing mentees with successful and influential women in leadership roles for a period of at least six months, COL helps these women and girls map their future paths. The first cohort of mentees included 82 women and girls from ten Commonwealth countries. Over 25 prominent women — from the Caribbean to Africa, Europe, Asia and the Pacific — have joined this initiative as mentors.

• Realising that Covid-19 has exacerbated the issue of violence, COL has worked with the Solomon Islands National Council of Women to develop a mobile app with information on various services related to gender, education, health and violence.
COL’s Parental Learning for Uninterrupted Schooling (PLUS) project particularly targets teachers and parents in nomadic communities living in the northern part of Ghana and the arid and semi-arid areas of Kenya, as well as marginalised communities in Rwanda. Experience in this project has shown that parents and other stakeholders in these regions are willing to collaborate with teachers to support children’s learning, irrespective of the parents’ literacy level or access to technology. The PLUS project particularly encourages parent–teacher collaboration as a means of improving teaching and learning outcomes in these communities.
COL has a strong portfolio and reputation for delivering high-quality technical support and leadership in ODL, OER and TEL across the Commonwealth. Its innovative approaches to teacher development, blended learning, and institutional capacity building in ODL, OER and TEL are at the cutting edge of educational innovation across the globe. COL’s repository of OER, education and gender manuals and tools, along with innovative technologies for helping institutions transform their practice and pedagogy and expand the opportunity that the digital educational age provides, is impressive. COL has learned throughout the period using the evidence from monitoring and evaluation. COL has adapted its approaches, leading to several new opportunities, innovations, programmes and impact in some areas of the world and mentionable achievements in some country contexts. As a result, COL is having an impact. Many of its initiatives and models have informed governments and partners in the countries where COL works, and many of the changes brought about by COL programming will be sustained by these governments and institutions.

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COL is on the “right side of educational history” and making an important contribution. Its rationale for action is strong. The needs COL is attempting to meet are real, and COL offers viable and effective solutions to its partners. COL can rightly claim to be directly influencing the quality of learning in the Commonwealth and to being a leader in pedagogical reform. It is not surprising that its partners, as well as individual educators, have a very positive view of COL. The prioritisation of inclusion, sustainability and gender resonates on many policy fronts and reflects modern thinking on development.

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References


Learning for Sustainable Development

COL’S IMPACT 2015–2021