COL's Support for Higher Education

While other development agencies moved their focus away from higher education (HE) in the 1990s, COL kept it firmly on its agenda, and was consistent in its convictions that investments in HE respond to the critical needs of the developing world and strong HE systems contribute substantially to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As Mahmood Mamdani reminded us at the 16th CCEM, higher education is the strategic heart of education because it is there that curriculum is developed, teachers trained and research undertaken.

The Commonwealth of Learning was established to:

". . . create and widen access to opportunities for learning, by promoting co-operation between universities, colleges and other educational institutions throughout the Commonwealth, making use of the potential offered by distance education and by the application of communication technologies to education. COL's activities will aim to strengthen member countries' capacities to develop the human resources required for their economic and social development . . ." (MOU on COL: As agreed by Commonwealth Governments on 1 September, 1988; and As amended, October 31, 1995, p. 2.)

The past two decades have seen a phenomenal growth in higher education at a distance across the developing Commonwealth, which can boast of several mega-universities such as IGNOU (India), AIOU (Pakistan), UNISA (South Africa) and numerous others. Recognising the need for increasing enrolments, developing countries have embarked on a process of the massification of HE and have often opted for distance education as a potentially cost-effective solution. For example, while there was only one institution offering distance education programmes in Sierra Leone in 1997, today there are four.

In addition to an increase in the number of single-mode open universities in the eighties and nineties, there has also been a huge growth in dual-mode and multi-modal/flexible institutions such as the University of the South Pacific (USP) and the University of the West Indies (UWI). A recent emergent trend demonstrates that the smaller states are not investing in either open universities or dual-mode institutions but ODL Centres such as the Adult Learning and Distance Education Centre (ALDEC) in Seychelles and the Gambia Open and Distance Education Centre (GOLDEC) to cater not just to education but also to the health and agriculture sectors.

More women enrol in distance education programmes and are at 61% compared to the 53% in contact institutions in South Africa (Glennie, 2004); in Namibia, 77% of distance learners are women with the proportion at 44% in Swaziland (Saint, 2000) while in India 35% women prefer distance education to the 29% in contact institutions (UGC, 1998). In addition to increasing access and equity, distance education costs half of conventional education in South Africa (Glennie, 2004); one-third in India and 17% in Sri Lanka (Yoshida, 2001).

Policy
COL has supported the development of ODL policy at national and institutional levels over the two decades of its existence. Appropriate policy can provide an enabling framework for the development of ODL and ICT-enhanced education at all levels. The role and impact of policy can best be exemplified by the Indian experience. While there were ODL institutions before the National Policy on Education (NPE), it was only after the articulation of a clear ODL policy, that an exponential increase in the number of institutions and enrolments was evident. The Indira Gandhi National Open University has over 1.4 million students and with its 13 state open universities and 106 dual-mode institutions, the Indian government expects 40% of all enrolments in HE to be in the distance education stream by 2010.

COL has played a catalytic role in setting the policy process into motion by developing knowledge products, enhancing professional capacity and organising National ODL Forums in partnership with Ministries of Education. While The Gambia has developed a policy for distance HE, Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Kenya are in the process of doing so. The objective has been to sensitise policy makers, planners and academics to the potential of ODL as a first step towards the development of a policy framework within which ODL will contribute not just to HE but also to other Tertiary Education (TE) and secondary school level institutions. Some years ago, a Feasibility Study for ODL in Mozambique was undertaken for the African Development Bank by bringing together COL staff and Consultants from around the Commonwealth and, most importantly, from within Mozambique. At the institutional level, work with the University of Delhi, the Sri Lankan University Grants Commission and elsewhere demonstrated both the real educational strengths and the political pitfalls of dual-mode and external tertiary education.

The mainstreaming of DE into the national development agenda has led nine Commonwealth countries to include ODL as a poverty reduction strategy in their Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). Zambia (ODL in tertiary, secondary education, literacy and livelihoods for out-of-school youth), The Gambia (teacher training), Guyana (DE centres for poverty reduction) and Sri Lanka have incorporated ODL in its developmental plans. In addition, Cameroon (HE), Ghana (literacy), Mozambique (secondary education), Pakistan (HE) and Tanzania (teacher training) have all included ODL in their PRSPs.

**Institutional Development**

COL has assisted many Commonwealth HE institutions in their development. At present, at the request of Commonwealth Ministers of Education, it is coordinating the establishment of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), which is a collaborative initiative involving 25 countries. Courses in a range of skills-related topics at postsecondary level are being developed collaboratively online. (See [www.col.org/vussc](http://www.col.org/vussc)). This is evidence of (i) our quick and concrete response to ministerial need; (ii) our commitment to strengthening existing HE institutions; and (iii) building capacity of staff and systems

**Professional Development**

Some governments were interested in the ways in which professionals in less advantaged countries might be assisted with their continuing professional education where a lack of local resources might preclude this. Legislative Drafting training, Surgical training and
Environmental awareness for policy makers are examples of this focus whilst the Commonwealth Executive Masters in Business Administration and Masters in Public Administration (CEMBA/MPA) programme offers a prospect of cost-effective preparation for commercial, bureaucratic and entrepreneurial professional life. These programmes have moved beyond their initial jurisdictions and assumed a pan-Commonwealth presence.

Quality Assurance

COL has focused on enhancing the quality of HE by developing context-specific and need-based Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines for Sri Lanka; running training workshops for the staff of state open universities in India and Nigeria; bringing out publications on best practice around the Commonwealth.

The focus of COL’s QA work has been two-fold: first, providing a review service for DE providers who fell outside their national QA audit/review services but who wanted recognition for the quality of the educational service they provided (e.g., Potchefstroom University, South Africa) or for those such as UNISA who wanted an audit to precede a national review; and second, a genuine concern to improve practice particularly in relation to correspondence and distance education courses in South Asia. More recently, COL has developed an annotated QA webpage with links to appropriate sites across the world. Our role has been to improve the quality of educational provision and to redress the balance between quantity and quality that can often be lost in the rush to demonstrate improved access.

Research

COL has been at the cutting-edge of the theory and practice of ODL through its Perspectives and World Review series. It has often worked in partnership with other organisations. COL and UNESCO commissioned a book on *Lifelong Learning and Distance Higher Education* (2004) to advise Member States on the emerging phenomenon of Lifelong Learning and how to deal with it at the national and institutional levels.

*Higher Education Crossing Borders: A Guide to the Implications of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) for Cross-border Education* (2006) was also developed jointly with UNESCO to serve the needs of policy-makers and practitioners. COL recently brought out a book of case studies entitled *Towards a Culture of Quality* in an effort to share ODL best practice across the Commonwealth.

COL has also contributed to the development of research capacity in ODL institutions by holding workshops and developing the first course of its kind, namely the Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training (PREST), which is available free of cost to all Member States.

Capacity-Building

Over 100 Vice Chancellors and senior administrators from Commonwealth African countries were trained in 'Managing Change: Leadership and Strategic Change in Higher Education',
organised over five years in collaboration with the University of Abertay Dundee in Scotland and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU). Centres of Expertise in ODL for West Africa and the SADC sub-region have been set up. In the past three years, several training workshops conducted by RETRIDOL, located in the National Open University of Nigeria, have resulted in over 300 persons from within Nigeria and Anglophone West Africa being trained in the different aspects of ODL including audio and video delivery media. ELearning training has now become a priority for some of our constituents.

**Regional and Pan-Commonwealth focus**

The focus on HE has covered all the regions of the Commonwealth. Access to HE is the priority in Sub-Saharan Africa and we believe that open and distance learning (ODL) can be an effective means of enhancing access, reducing costs and improving the quality and relevance of education and training. In South Asia, the priority is Quality Assurance and E-content development. For example, while the Indian sub-continent has assumed a leadership role in ODL, the quality of ODL delivery and research could do with substantial improvement. In the Pacific and the Caribbean, the focus has been on professional development. The Graduate Diploma Programme in Legislative Drafting is on offer at the University of the West Indies and the University of the South Pacific.

In order to leverage our modest resources, our approach has been to forge partnerships as well as to promote south-south collaboration. The most recent model of collaboration is the VUSSC.

**Action Plans**

COL has developed individual Country Action Plans for 2006-2009 in consultation with key stakeholders. Higher Education continues to be high on the priority of developing Member States and COL will continue to support the needs and priorities of its partners. As the use of new ICTs blurs the boundaries between distance and contact education, COL's role is further expanded. COL has experience and expertise in a range of technologies and can provide technical assistance on what will prove effective in which context. COL's approach has been to build replicable models that can support the needs of individual nations. A further valuable resource that COL provides is access to the vast networks that it has nurtured and supported over the years. As a small agency, COL is able to respond almost immediately to requests from Member States.

As over half of the Commonwealth's population is under 25 and will need further education and training, it is important to strengthen existing HE systems. COL, as the instrument created by CHOGM, is ideally situated to continue contributing to making learning for development our common wealth.

28 March 2007