The Commonwealth of Learning
Six-Year Plan:
Mid-Term Strategic Review of Programmes

May 2018
Six-Year Plan:
Mid-Term Strategic Review of Programmes
Final Report
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**Acronyms and Abbreviations**

**ALESCO:** Arab League Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
**CEMCA:** Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia  
**CEMBA:** Commonwealth Executive Master of Business Administration  
**CFS:** Child Friendly Schools  
**COL:** Commonwealth of Learning  
**DOER:** Directory of Open Educational Resources  
**eLIO:** e-Learning for International Organisations  
**FaB:** Flexible and Blended  
**GI:** Gender Initiative  
**HE:** Higher Education  
**ICDE:** International Council for Open and Distance Education  
**ICT:** Information and Communication Technologies  
**IITK:** Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur  
**INSET:** In-service Education and Training of Teachers  
**IT:** Information Technology  
**KTU:** Koforidua Technical University  
**M&E:** Monitoring and Evaluation  
**NCE:** Nigeria Certificate in Education  
**NSOU:** Netaji Subhas Open University  
**ODL:** Open and Distance Learning  
**OER:** Open Educational Resources  
**OIS:** Open Innovative Schooling  
**ORELT:** Open Resources for English Language Teaching  
**OSOU:** Odisha State Open University  
**QA:** Quality assurance
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RBM:</td>
<td>Results Based Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>RIM:</td>
<td>Review and Improvement Model</td>
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<tr>
<td>RtU:</td>
<td>Reaching the Unreached</td>
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<tr>
<td>SACCO:</td>
<td>Savings and Credit Cooperative Organization</td>
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<td>SROI:</td>
<td>Social Return on Investment</td>
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<tr>
<td>SusTEACH:</td>
<td>Sustainable Tools for Environmental Appraisal of Carbon Impacts of HE Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>SWOT:</td>
<td>Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats</td>
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<td>TDP:</td>
<td>Teacher Development Programme</td>
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<td>TE:</td>
<td>Teacher Education</td>
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<td>TEL:</td>
<td>Technology-Enabled Learning</td>
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<td>TESSA:</td>
<td>Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
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<td>TQF:</td>
<td>Transnational Qualifications Framework</td>
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<td>TVET:</td>
<td>Technical and Vocational Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>TVSD:</td>
<td>Technical and Vocational Skills Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>VfM:</td>
<td>Value for Money</td>
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<tr>
<td>VUSSC:</td>
<td>Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth</td>
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Executive Summary

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) commissioned a strategic review of its programmes at the mid-point of its current Six-Year Plan (2015 – 2021). The review was conducted on the basis of reflective reports by the leads of its programmes and was supplemented by additional information such as evaluation reports, research studies, and interviews with COL staff. The review critically examines strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in order to consider areas for possible course corrections or increased focus. Overall, the review revealed a consistently strong set of programmes with dedicated and expert management. The key conclusions are:

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. COL is providing leadership in non-formal learning, which is an important institutional shift. The establishment of COL as a centre of expertise and advocate for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is moving forward well. The foundation for this is excellent and many efforts underway, for example, various impact evaluations, will help tremendously. The diversity of COL’s programmes provides a rich opportunity for cross-fertilisation and lesson-learning. COL’s research and policy analysis is widely cited and frequently downloaded. COL can also boast of a wide and influential set of partner institutions, ranging from government institutions and universities to Open Educational Resources (OER) organisations and donors like Canada, Australia and intergovernmental organisations like UN Women and UNESCO. COL’s networks extend beyond the Commonwealth.

COL’s Six-Year Plan represents a significant programme shift towards an outcomes model. Many of the programmes still face challenges in making this transition, for a variety of reasons ranging from changes in staff, legacy programmes, and complications in partner relations. However, the plan is on track and moving in a positive direction. There is a need for more attention to COL’s influence strategies. More emphasis is needed on the diagnostic dimension and consideration given to multiple avenues of influence. A lot of this seems to be happening quietly and on an ad hoc basis, hence more explicit planning and implementation might help. ODL and OER advocacy is challenged by a mixed evidence base and some limitations of COL’s partners. As well, the implied paradigm shift for some partners is daunting. A review of how the corporate outcomes relate to the individual programme log frames is warranted. More emphasis on demand over supply will be fruitful. There is uneven data collection and analysis across programmes. A lot of the research is very good, but more attention is needed on methodological issues in some areas. The production of high quality research requires investment but will produce many benefits.

COL has several opportunities to deepen its niche and document its impact, for example, by diversifying partnerships or extending its gender focus. A few recommendations are provided, such as greater investment in monitoring and evaluation, and a modest review of programme log frames.
1. Introduction
The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is undertaking a mid-point review of its 2015-21 programme plan and sought out an external consultant to support this process. The primary goal of this assignment is a strategic review of programmes and their progress towards intended impacts.

While the reviewer has not made an attempt to empirically evaluate the programmes directly, specific studies conducted by the initiatives/projects have provided insight into the effectiveness of their interventions. The key question is to what extent are the programmes on track to reach their objectives, and are they in need of any mid-point corrections?

The inputs for this review included substantial mid-term reports by the programme leads and many supplementary documents such as action research studies, programme evaluations (where they existed) and monitoring reports. The 21 documents referenced and submitted as supporting evidence for the initiative reflections are outlined in Annex 1. These studies and reports helped to assess the validity of the reflections on progress and inform the strengths and challenges analysis for each initiative provided in Annex 2.

In addition, there was a significant volume of material available on COL’s website and repository, and in the public domain. As well, there were interviews of key staff convened remotely and face-to-face. The overall context for the discussions was quite positive and the COL staff were forthright and professional. There was every indication they were prepared to be constructive and self-critical.

2. Setting the Context
The context for development programmes has been shifting significantly in recent years. Although extreme poverty is declining overall, and many indicators such as infant mortality and primary school enrolment are improving, there are still many gaps. The Paris and Accra Declarations on development cooperation have shifted the norms towards a more shared agenda, a movement that has been reinforced by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, much of the path dependency and patron-client relations persist, and many developing nations still look externally for the resources they need. The situation has been made significantly more complex with the emergence of many new actors such as specialised multilateral organisations such as the Global Fund and wealthy actors like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. There is a growing critique of the effectiveness of development programmes and, consequently, a strong interest in measuring impact. This has heightened the need for better data and sparked a search for research methods such as impact evaluations, systematic reviews, randomised controlled trials, and experimental design. Technology has been frequently cited for its potential benefits, but innovation is often shown to be more complicated than a “magic bullet.”

In the education sector, there is a similar good news/bad news story. The abolition of school fees may have helped enrolment, but there are serious concerns about quality. Graduation rates lag behind and many people, especially women and girls, are still left out. High teacher absenteeism rates signal the fact that many education systems are constrained by resource gaps, morale concerns, poor infrastructure,
and outdated pedagogy. Like development in general, the education field is becoming very crowded. There are many excellent organisations such as the Global Partnership for Education and UNESCO hard at work on these challenges, as well as many donors such as the UK, Canada and Australia.

3. General Observations

The decision to engage in a strategy review of COL’s suite of programmes shows the organisation to be modern, progressive and professional. The current Six-Year Plan with its preference for outcomes and measuring impact further reinforces the conclusion that COL is a forward-looking organisation. Throughout the process, there has been an honest effort shown by the COL staff and management to scrutinise what COL does in a critical and constructive manner. The reports provided to the consultant have been rich in detail and candid in self-reflection. Likewise, the informants have been helpful and direct. There seemed to be little sense of anxiety that a harsh critique was about to be levied. Rather, the staff have shown an interest in new ideas from the education and development field and research outside the ambit of COL. It is clear the staff at COL possess significant expertise. They understand very well the constraints for COL and its programmes, and revealed a wealth of ideas about how to adapt for greater impact.

The simple answer about whether COL programmes are on track is that they are. A review of the information provided at the initiative level shows that in many cases, the achievement of the mid-point targets has been met or even exceeded. Where there are gaps, the explanations are reasonable. For example, some programmes have recently re-started with a new set of partners or the partners themselves have not taken the necessary actions. Table 1 summarises the cumulative progress towards to select intermediate and long term corporate outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intermediate Outcome</th>
<th>2018 Target</th>
<th>Progress as of May 2018</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More curricula and learning resources in place which are relevant to sustainable</td>
<td>180 curricula/learning resources</td>
<td>3,285 curricula/learning resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development and are gender responsive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More institutions/organisations take up and implement tested ODL models for scaling</td>
<td>80 institutions</td>
<td>120 institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More governments and organisations develop and adopt ODL policies and create</td>
<td>10 national policies/strategies and 80 institutional policies/strategies developed</td>
<td>50 national policies/strategies and 117 institutional policies/strategies developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategies for quality learning opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More sustainable communities of practice</td>
<td>30 sustained collaborations</td>
<td>13 sustained collaborations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More learners being reached by resources and models</td>
<td>415,000 learners reached</td>
<td>580,388 learners reached</td>
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Table 1. Cumulative progress towards Corporate Outcome Targets
3.1. COL’s Ambitious Agenda and Strategy for the Long Term

COL has been recognised by key stakeholders at the 2018 CHOGM for promoting collaboration among states and for moving the education agenda forward. The goal of providing 12 years of quality education for girls and boys will need the innovative approaches supported by COL. COL’s primary mission has a solid rationale. The critical importance of knowledge today, the gaps in access to schooling, the need for pedagogical reform, the imperatives of sustainability and the need for increasing productivity are issues that resonate widely. They are central to the SDGs and can be found in the national development plans of almost every country in the world. As well, there is widespread agreement that key tools of COL, such as ICTs and OER, can be effective and have the potential to affect a quantum leap in many areas of the learning enterprise. COL can readily identify its ultimate beneficiaries, who tend to be those that are disenfranchised and excluded from learning opportunities that will change their lives. Lastly, COL enjoys significant political and funding support from a diverse network of states in the Commonwealth, largely stemming from its history of effective programmes.

This positive description belies the very real challenges that COL faces. The fact is that COL operates in a difficult sphere of advocacy. It is seeking to resolve many of the problems that well established formal institutions face, many of which are fraught with difficulties. Much of COL’s advocacy seeks to disrupt long-established patterns of pedagogy and institutional control. While extending the promise of improving impact and supporting teachers, the ODL agenda reveals vividly the shortfalls of the current system. In many cases COL is advocating for partners to do more, often when those same partners have fewer resources than ever to fulfil their current function. COL’s agenda is ultimately a social justice agenda which emphasises inclusion and gender equality. The trouble with such an agenda is many actors have no choice but to agree with it at least publicly while privately perhaps having no commitment to it.

The rhetoric of inclusive access to learning, relevance to the labour market, or deployment of innovative technology is quite convincing. It is no surprise that senior decision-makers such as ministers of education or university presidents agree publicly to support this agenda and to commit their institutions to contractual arrangements. However, obstacles such as funding gaps, IT resources, organisational culture, technical competencies, policy frameworks, and mid-level leadership, are often glossed over by COL partners. There are many examples from the review of long delays in completing agreements, or of developed projects that have not been launched. The decision of COL to seek out only willing partners or to narrow the focus to a small number of institutions is a good strategic choice in the face of this challenge. However, it also raises the question of how COL can be even more strategic.

There is evidence that many of the programming shifts under the current plan position COL as moving from a resource agency, or in some cases, even a donor role, to an advocacy organisation. A significant proportion of COL’s function is that of an advocate, convincing partners to undertake policy shifts, promoting the value of new approaches, and training professionals with a new pedagogical model. The need for paradigm shifts was mentioned by nearly every single informant. Notably though, in many of the theories of change and output-outcome charts reviewed, there is much less attention devoted to how advocacy and influence are supposed to work, and a lot more on lists of activities. Some of the items listed as outcomes should probably be classified as outputs.
3.2. COL’s Advocacy for Lifelong Learning

COL’s programming and policy orientation are well suited to the imperatives in the education domain that face the Commonwealth and indeed much of the developing world. There are questions of access to learning and its associated benefits that plague governments around the world. How can the outcomes of greater inclusion, enhanced productivity, and engaged citizens be much more widely distributed? What strategies exist to do this at affordable costs? How can learning be applied by more people in their daily lives? These points of focus resonate with SDG4 and share the same ambitions for inclusive and lifelong learning.

At least some of the answers here exist at the nexus of formal and non-formal learning. COL advocates for a significant expansion of new forms of learning that move beyond simply re-packaging traditional formal learning. The approach positions learners as active in managing their own learning. In many ways, the teacher becomes a collaborator rather than the source of knowledge. The key term here is *heutagogy*. COL is certainly not alone in advocating for student-centered learning, but COL much more readily embraces the value of non-formal and lifelong learning.

The paradigm shift that this entails represents significant challenges for COL. Formal learning has long embraced traditional, hierarchical forms of learning. Heutagogy at one level appears to threaten the primacy of teachers and their hard-won bodies of knowledge. As well, there is a preference among many education stakeholders for certified and formalised knowledge, which raises questions about the validity of qualifications frameworks and institutional branding. Without doubt, many of COL’s partners see the ODL and Technology-Enabled Learning (TEL) approaches as simply new ways to do what they already do, rather than a radical shift to a new model. COL will have to make substantial effort to promote and sensitize partners as to the value and efficacy of student-oriented models. There is certainly research available on how to do this, not just whether to do it (see Kim and Davies, 2014).

A perspective that COL might further elaborate is the notion that many Commonwealth education systems are exclusive and disempowering for some portions of their citizenry. Many are left out, especially women and girls, simply through the classic mechanisms of socio-economic stratification. In furthering this perspective, it must be remembered that social justice perspectives can generate some complex politics.

3.3. Enhancing Influence

Fortunately, COL has a good reputation for research and policy analysis. Its documents are widely cited and the list of organisations and governments wanting to expand linkages to COL’s work is growing. These include of course Commonwealth governments, but also UNESCO, the Arab League Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ALESCO), and universities in China. COL has built up a strong network of senior level supporters and many examples can be cited of ministers or university presidents praising the work of COL and committing to deeper partnerships. The recent high praise of COL at the 20th Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers is but one example. However, there are limits to the impact of such approbations. Many COL staff reported frustrations that the support of senior decision-makers did not translate into action on the ground.
An effective model of influence in place at COL is the top-down, bottom-up and middle-in approach. This approach recognises the risks of depending on a single mode of influence to trigger change. The world of development is unfortunately replete with examples of how reforms don’t work if dictated from on high, or even from the capitals of donor countries. COL’s approach, which involves working with senior decision-makers as well as mid-level staff and practitioners, does much to get around this challenge but even more can be done. Alignment with like-minded organisations will also help. The partnerships with UNESCO and Association of Commonwealth Universities are examples of this. Communities of practice are also effective for spreading ideas but they often have the limitation of being groups of peers who are already “converted.” Additional measures such as identifying champions, demonstration projects, evidence briefs, and policy briefs can be considered. The “anecdote that sings” (for example, in the GIRLS Inspire report) can also be very persuasive.

The ideal scenario is when promotion activities result in directly expressed demand to decision-makers by key stakeholders, which in COL’s case would include learners, teachers, and employers. How can COL trigger more demand? What are the unique channels of influence in each of the contexts for COL’s programmes? Has the diagnostic work been done to understand what works to trigger demand? For most formal institutions, the research evidence stream is fundamentally important. COL has a great resource of reports, policy briefs, etc. which support its advocacy. What can be done to make them more accessible and appealing for the decision-makers COL wants to influence?

As was mentioned by many informants, it is often a challenge for decision-makers to adopt what are clearly good approaches, when these same decision-makers are stressed to deliver using their current approaches. Additionality is both attractive and stressful. In nearly every case, COL is arguing for more and complementary programmes which sound very good, but questions immediately arise about how they will be paid for. Implicitly in a financially constrained situation, there is the perception of a zero-sum game, in which something old will have to be dropped to implement something new.

The COL programmes that aim to enhance and document partner capacity in ODL offer one of the best alternatives to the problem of a constrained partner. Increased capacity improves the likelihood of concrete action. Explicit definitions of capacity, which include skills and knowledge, policy frameworks, mandates, technology, dedicated organisational units, and the TQF, among other dimensions, are helpful. Many COL activities are centred on this and might be expanded (see also Minnaar, 2013).

3.4. Making the ODL and OER Case

Is the ultimate COL mission to modernise education in the Commonwealth? There were many references in the programmes of the need to improve the use of technology in education and to reform pedagogical practice. If so, one of the fundamental challenges for COL is to present unequivocal evidence that ODL, OER and MOOCs will make a fundamental and measurable difference for learners.

The fact is, the case is fairly difficult to make, despite the many credible anecdotes, testimonials, survey results, project evaluations, and other evidence that is put forward. A common comment heard in the review was that there were “good things being achieved” but it was hard to demonstrate them. In the research literature, there are evidence gaps about the impact of ICTs in education. There are challenges in evaluating the role of ICTs in education, including potential bias, lack of M&E capacity, and non-
standardised indicators, among others. Online learning is also not always cheaper, despite the idea that a digitised good can be reproduced at very low cost. Lastly, quite naturally, there are quality concerns from governments and educational institutions that are already embedded in the current regulatory frameworks.

The available evidence on the impact of ICTs on learning achievement is somewhat mixed, although there are many examples of success stories. The use of ICTs in many settings has proven remarkable, for example in refugee camps. The collaboration made possible through ICTs can be impressive and inspiring. Many of the testimonials from COL participants and practitioners confirm this. It is also the case that distance learning does work for some students but not others. Dropout rates can be very high.

There seems to be no shortage of advocates for increased use of ICTs in education, though most of them note the many challenges blocking higher uptake, including infrastructure, policy gaps, affordability, and training deficits. A UNESCO report, Digital Services for Education in Africa (2015) provides a useful overview of the potential benefits but also the difficulties that lie ahead. COL has recognised the challenges explicitly in many places, including the OER Global Report 2017.

A key conclusion for this review is that COL has significant opportunity with its diverse programming to demonstrate that OER, ODL, and TEL are pedagogically better, aside from access considerations, which are indisputable. This lynchpin evaluation effort is clearly underway in the COL programmes and should be continued. The ultimate demonstration of impact will almost certainly be a comparative study of the success of those who used ODL with those who did not.

The working paper related to a reduced carbon footprint among distance learners in Botswana (Carr et al, 2018) is very appealing in a context where climate change and sustainability concerns dominate. The same can be said for enhancing the impact on gender issues, which are increasingly seen as a valid proxy for development in general. Investment in these areas should pay off in terms of influence, as well as being very worthy programme goals in themselves.

3.5. Measuring Impact

It was clear that the new strategic plan launched in 2015 signalled a more pronounced shift towards outcomes and impact. It is obvious that COL programmes staff took this seriously and have made significant efforts to move away from an old-style development model mostly based on outputs. There is consistency in the use of RBM models with intermediate and long term outcomes. Interestingly, the staff often reported that COL partners are the ones struggling with the conceptualisation, design, and implementation of RBM (see Annex A).

The policy shift of the COL Six-Year Plan showed a notable ambition. It placed the emphasis on impact, demand, and long term outcomes. This is in contrast to more traditional development models which are mostly supply oriented and tend towards the provision of outputs. These older approaches often have questionable theories of change with questionable assumptions about how the outputs and activities will actually cause real change. COL has set out a vision of long term outcomes, for instance, “improved sustainable livelihoods” towards which COL programmes strive. All of the COL programmes reviewed make reference to this vision and attempt in one fashion or another to support it. It is clear that for some programmes, the leap to the long term outcomes prescribed by COL senior management is still a work in progress. In some programmes there appears to be a need for more connective tissue between
the activities that are currently underway and these high-level outcomes. Theories of change, if done well, should be a road map to action.

Many of the COL programmes reviewed had explicit intention to collect baseline data, implement tracer studies, and build the foundation for evaluations of impact. However, there have been a number of delays related to recent re-casting of the programmes and capacity weaknesses in partners. To a large extent, it falls to the partners to establish the data collection systems. This is an area where COL has been offering substantial support, for example with the analysis of impact conducted for the L3F program. The baseline-endline report on the GIRLS Inspire program is a model to be followed. It is clear that more effort is needed and that more proactivity in this area will pay dividends. Evaluating impact ex post facto is usually more challenging and misses the opportunity for experimental design. COL staff have a lot of expertise as researchers to share (for example, on girls empowerment) and there might be benefits from such opportunities as research workshops or training on impact evaluation.

3.6. Keeping Pedagogy Front and Centre

There is an extensive literature on how to increase learning outcomes in the developing world, much of it focused on access. COL can point to many cohorts of current and potential learners who benefit from more access. These include out-of-school youth, women farmers, and children in underserved schools, just to name a few. COL is making a strong contribution here by supporting open education institutions, reducing textbook costs, and deploying technology for learning.

An important global effort to increase access to education was the abolition of school fees. There was wide evidence that access was seriously impeded by cost. There is debate about whether the overall impact of the loss of resources to the education system from a no-school-fees policy has been negative or positive. Without doubt more children are in school now than were a decade ago, but in many cases, this has meant larger classes with more complex learning needs. The pass rates from primary schools have not kept pace with the enrolment increases.

This has highlighted the inadequacies of the current system and pushed policy-makers to consider new approaches like the use of technology. The efficiency of OER in extending access is often cited by advocates. The use of technology in learning is also seen as an opportunity to reform pedagogical practice, making it more interactive and student centred. A useful study by Kremer et al. (2013) indicated that one of the best investments to address school quality issues is pedagogical reform. Technology can have a positive role here.

One of the key challenges in using technology for anything, including education, is the historical pattern of exciting innovation followed by disappointing results. The disruptive effect of technology is often over-estimated. There are many examples of this, for example, the One Laptop Per Child programme which was launched with great enthusiasm on the theme of empowerment. However, the programme has been widely criticized for ignoring pedagogy or not tracking learning outcomes. It is difficult enough to design courses and implement the technology to give access to them, but more difficult still to design and implement interactive, collaborative and stimulating pedagogy to go with them. Teachers are the key to success and a clear understanding of their motivations is important for successful implementation. The key challenge for COL here is to help its partners move beyond simply providing technology-enabled opportunities, such as hosting MOOCs, to ensure that the pedagogical elements are
very strong. (As a side note, an interesting thinker on the pedagogy of open courses is Robyn Derosa; see also Open learning).

COL has a lot to offer to its partners in terms of modernising pedagogical practice and addressing the daunting challenge of poor quality teaching. COL should always be able to simply and eloquently explain why its approach to pedagogy will really make a difference.

3.7. On the Verge of Organisational Evolution?

It could be argued that COL is now traversing an organisation spectrum from resource agency to advocacy organisation. COL is certainly a recognised centre of expertise on ODL, but in many places, COL is still doing resource provision, for example, by hosting materials online, providing technological solutions (e.g. APTUS), offering training, and collaborating on policy development. There were several examples of partners asking COL to act like a donor, for example, by providing complete APTUS devices or funding training. There is no argument these resources are needed, and their absence is a serious impediment to progress for the partner institutions. The point is not that COL should stop providing these services, but rather that it should consider how to position itself differently over time with its partners.

There may be a legacy challenge for COL based on its previous role as a resource agency, or even a donor. More clarity on what it can now offer to partners, and what it cannot, may be helpful. It is a fair generalisation that education in the developing world is under severe strain with larger and more diverse classes, high teacher absenteeism, outdated pedagogy and inadequate facilities. This provides a good rationale for the improved outcomes COL would like to see. It also means there is a need to act selectively and strategically.

COL operates in what could often be described as a crowded field, and one that is currently experiencing organisational stresses and resource constraints. The growth of ODL is remarkable, with blended models becoming more common, and the whole sector appears to be evolving quickly. The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), of which COL is a member, has a long list of members. In Africa alone, there are many groups working on e-learning and extending resources to schools. The Asia region also has organisations supporting distance learning. Another example of the number of actors in the COL sphere is of those working on financial literacy. There are other institutions such as universities that offer support for distance learning to the Commonwealth. Without question, COL’s profile and networks within the ODL sphere are good. Many of the programmes reviewed had strong connections to other influential actors and the staff at COL are very well-networked. The bottom line is that there is a perennial need to establish a niche and an easily communicated value-added.
4. Opportunities and Recommendations for COL

This review has generated several opportunities for COL to consider in terms of expanding its influence, securing more support, and solidifying its niche.

4.1. Opportunities

4.1.1. Diversifying partnerships

The success of programmes such as GIRLS Inspire and the Child Friendly Schools (CFS) project under Teacher Education (TE) stems partly from having strong and focused partners like Canada and Australia, UNICEF and TESSA. These donors insist upon sophisticated M&E and have the resources to support large-scale interventions. Often donors have resource matching requirements, which COL can easily fulfill, given that Commonwealth governments support its core budget. There is potential for COL to expand its search for partnerships with education actors such as donors, the Global Partnership for Education, UNESCO, IDRC, or foundations like Gates. COL brings effective models, its own resources, and strong networks, features that would positively distinguish it from other organisations. Although there are risks in becoming overly centred around the projects of others, COL’s expertise would receive a lot of exposure in more partnerships.

4.1.2. Gender

Many Commonwealth countries have expressed profound interest in improving the lot of women and girls. Canada has for example, its Feminist International Assistance Policy and will be touting girls’ education as a theme when it convenes the next G7 meeting. There are many organisations actively supporting women and girls, for example, Women Deliver and the African Women’s Development Fund. Many COL programmes have significant impact for women and girls but these efforts can be increased and better showcased.

4.1.3. Evidence production

The M&E functions at COL have a good foundation and it is the ambition of every programme to do more. Given its long history in many of the programme areas, there is an opportunity for COL to examine its archived records to generate some “lessons learned briefs.” The relatively high completion rates for some of the MOOCs and other areas using COL technological support indicate a rich area for analysis and documentation. Surveys and other methods of exploring student experiences will no doubt yield useful insights to share. Some programmes, for instance L3F, now have baseline data that can be used to consider impact. Student experiences, for example, with eLIO or TEL, can be studied to further elucidate the value of the models.

4.1.4. Demand

A good practice seen across COL programmes is that of seeking out ready partners and building links with actors who are associated with demands, such as employers. This may be taken further. For example, COL could encourage institutional partners to do follow-up studies on the employability of graduates or convene public policy discussions via proposals from partners (e.g. University of Guyana and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) program).
4.1.5. Technology and pedagogy interface

COL has made a strong contribution to the technology of learning through its high quality course hosting and the APTUS device. There is good potential here for the expansion of an important development strategy. Rather than giving more resources to partners, an approach COL wants to avoid, COL can specialise in helping partners customise the technology to fit their own needs.

4.1.6. Extending influence

The communication products COL produces are very good. With the rise of social media and micro-targeting, there is an opportunity to do even more now. Naturally, large countries like India can dominate the content pipeline but COL’s wide range of partners and regions indicates there is a lot of potentially interesting and influential material available. COL is a centre of expertise and more people should know about it.

4.2. Recommendations

• COL has a good foundation for documenting its impact with further collection of data and more analysis of its programme effects. This will mean a re-doubled effort to collect baseline data where feasible and increasing the analytical skill set at COL, perhaps through additional human resources. More investment in monitoring and evaluation will pay dividends in COL’s advocacy functions.

• COL would profit from a modest review of the log frames and theories of change for each of its programmes. There is nothing fundamentally flawed but there can be some adjustments done to make the targets and indicators more nuanced, consistent, and accurate.

• To move COL further in the direction of policy advocacy and to increase its strategic influence, it is suggested that individual COL programmes invest some time in developing customised strategies. In addition to persuading senior decision-makers to support COL’s agenda, consideration is needed of how to incentivise change among all the actors involved.

5. Conclusion

COL’s new programming and policy orientation in the current Six-Year Plan is moving in a very positive direction. The policy context for COL’s approach is favourable and it is well positioned to respond to the needs of its partners. The history of COL’s programming provides a solid foundation for its advocacy as does its impressive set of networks. The current suite of programmes is quite diverse and represents a great foundation for research. The impulse of COL to evaluate its programme impacts and pursue strategies to increase them is the hallmark of a progressive and sustainable organisation. Overall, it is clear that the orientation of the staff is thoughtful, passionate and forward-looking.

For many of the programmes, the current plan marks a departure from past approaches and has the natural growing pains that would accompany such a shift. Undoubtedly, many of the programmes are making a positive impact, but are challenged in presenting unequivocal evidence of it. Hence, more investment in data collection and impact evaluation is warranted. Likewise, more consideration of how to influence the various actors in a crowded and rapidly changing field will pay off for COL. The President
of COL speaks of six shifts that COL is leading and COL does have much to offer in terms of educational reform. The paradigm shifts involved are a struggle for COL’s partners, and more emphasis on the added value of the OER and ODL models may be needed.

Despite these challenges, COL is positioned well for the second half of its Six-Year Plan.
References


### Annex 1 Supporting Studies Submitted with Initiative Reflections

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<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Report title and author</th>
<th>Description/Objectives</th>
<th>Methodological approach</th>
<th>Key findings</th>
<th>Lessons and implications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CEMCA</td>
<td>OER Policy Implementation and Use in Open and Distance Learning System: An Evaluative Study By Dr. S.K. Pulist</td>
<td>To evaluate the CEMCA initiatives for promotion of OER at three open universities in Asia</td>
<td>Mixed method interpretative descriptive approach; surveys, focus group discussions, interviews, and document analysis</td>
<td>There is evidence that educators are using OER and feel it is making an impact on the quality of teaching and learning.</td>
<td>COL should offer further technical support and capacity building for educators using OER, as well as QA mechanisms for OER.</td>
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<td>CEMCA</td>
<td>Interim Report: Comprehensive Study of Open Educational Resources (OER) in NSOU and OSOU by Educational Technology &amp; Management Academy (ETMA)</td>
<td>To assess the awareness, accessibility availability, attitude towards, and utilisation of OER; to determine the impact of OER on learning outcome of students at NSOU and OSOU.</td>
<td>Surveys of 273 students from NSOU and 146 students from OSOU; teachers and counsellors, and coordinators of study centre; interviews with Vice Chancellors and OER coordinators</td>
<td>Despite enormous potential of OER, and students’ receptivity, a serious blockage is lack of awareness. Impact of OER on learning outcomes could not be studied as access was low.</td>
<td>There is a need to develop/design mechanisms of dissemination of OER and to create awareness to encourage use.</td>
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<td>CEMCA</td>
<td>From Listener to Learner: The Role of Community Radio and Community Activities on Health Related Knowledge, Empowerment and Health Seeking Behaviours by COL, with Dr Sreedher</td>
<td>To explore the “Science for Women’s Health and Nutrition” project’s impact on women’s health seeking behaviour, health knowledge, as well as their sense of empowerment</td>
<td>Two villages from within the Radio Pravara listening zone in Maharashtra and two villages from within the Radio Kothagiri listening zone in Tamil Nadu as well as two villages outside the two listening zones (one in differences in empowerment were statistically significant between the control group and the other three groups in Maharashtra; Similar differences in Tamil Nadu were not.</td>
<td>Shift in focus towards community dialogue and increasing the frequency and quality of health debate that address complex health issues, should be made an integral part of future projects.</td>
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<td>Study Title</td>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Results</td>
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<td>GIRLS Inspire Evaluation of GIRLS Inspire—Commonwealth of Learning</td>
<td>Ramamurthy and Shirley Deepak</td>
<td>Randomly selected from a list of villages as the control and treatment group populations. Surveys were conducted</td>
<td>No distinguishable impact on health seeking behaviour.</td>
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<td>Baseline-Endline Report: Reaching the Unreached through ODL in Bangladesh,</td>
<td>Baseline and endline data from a sample of participants was collected through surveys. A Social Return on Investment (SROI) was conducted to assess the impact of the project on livelihoods and empowerment</td>
<td>The probability of being employed increased by 50 p.p. Monthly earnings and income increased by approximately five times. The SROI showed an increase of 10 p.p. in the probability of the gender of the decision maker being female.</td>
<td>The results suggest that the GIRLS Inspire project had a high economic return, with an increase in probability of being employed, hours of work, earnings &amp; income, and empowerment</td>
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<td>India and Pakistan by COL (Internal)</td>
<td>The baseline-endline study for the RtU component of the GIRLS Inspire project was conducted to understand the project’s impact in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan; the baseline-endline study looked specifically at the women’s and girls’</td>
<td>Baseline and endline data from a sample of participants, including women/girls and community members was collected through surveys, and changes in attitudes and perceptions of key indicators related to livelihoods and empowerment were assessed</td>
<td>When women and girls feel less able to access family support and health resources, they are less likely to feel confident about their ability to participate in economic activities.</td>
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<td>Suggests the importance of a holistic approach to women’s and girls’ sustainable livelihoods — including establishing and maintaining support networks for women and girls to help with family- and health related issues. (COL, 2017)</td>
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<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>COL-RIM Evaluation Report</td>
<td>To evaluate the extent of the current evidence for the impact of the COL-RIM on strengthening the quality management and assurance practices of three institutions that had undertaken the COL-RIM exercise during the last Strategic Plan</td>
<td>Desk based study; a short questionnaire sent to three institutions</td>
<td>Staff awareness and staff capacity building was an important positive outcome of the COL-RIM. None of the reports indicate whether any systematic review of existing quality assurance systems and practices took place as part of the COL-RIM process.</td>
<td>Institutions should identify and articulate their specific objectives and strategic goals underpinning their decision to implement the RIM, to assist them to evaluate their own capacity and to assist COL’s evaluations. COL should consider undertaking a further review of the guidance and processes in the Handbook</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Evaluation of CEMBA/MPA Allama Iqbal Open University/Commonwealth of Learning by Ricardo L. Cohn (2018)</td>
<td>To assess the return on investment of the CEMBA/PA Programme at AIOU</td>
<td>Quasi-experimental design. Data was collected by surveying the graduates and current students of CEMPA/MPA with a questionnaire that includes questions on labour market outcomes for the years of 2012 and 2017; demographic characteristics; educational characteristics and others. Our sample is composed by</td>
<td>An increase of 31.6% on annual income, which corresponds to approximately 160,405 PKR (=1,819 CAD). The return on investment is 239% per year, that is, for every dollar a student invests in CEMBA/MPA, she/he gets on average 3.39 dollars of return.</td>
<td>The low programme cost (as a share of total income) and the high impact on income explains the high economic return</td>
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<td>Program</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>Future Recommendations</td>
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<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Report on the Survey of COL-Sponsored Graduates by Alexis Carr, Kayla Ortlieb and Romeela Mohee (2018)</td>
<td>To assess the impact of COL’s sponsorship programme on graduates who were sponsored by COL to complete one of the following programmes: the Certificate in Designing and Facilitating e-learning from the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand; the Masters of Instructional Design and Technology from the Open University of Malaysia; and Legislative Drafting from the University of the South Pacific</td>
<td>Due to a lack of baseline data and no viable control group, the survey collected self-reported data. The survey was sent by email to 108 graduates who studied in one of the listed programmes from 2009-2016. The analysis was therefore based on the 29 completed surveys</td>
<td>Findings suggest that there have been notable positive impacts of the programmes on the graduates in terms of their employment, career path and competencies gained. There has been some impact on the income of graduates; two of the three programmes, OPNZ and LD, have a positive return in terms of the benefit-cost ratio. In the future, baseline data on graduates should be collected prior to enrolment and followed-up with an endline survey 1-2 years after programme completion. All the programmes’ VfM results should be benchmarked</td>
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<td>L3F</td>
<td>Survey and Analysis of the Lifelong Learning for Farmers Initiative Implemented by</td>
<td>The study sought to determine the impact of L3F on the learning, empowerment</td>
<td>The study used primary data collected through a structured questionnaire</td>
<td>The data suggests that L3F farmers have higher empowerment and profits. The data informed several other research articles and reports (See below)</td>
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Matumaini Mapya Savings and Credit Cooperatives in Tanzania. Draft Report by Dr Rosemary Atieno (2016)

and income of participants administered to three categories of farmers, who were sampled from the members of the L3F programme, those who are not participating in the L3F programme but are members of the SACCO and those who are neither members of the L3F nor the SACCO compared to their non-L3F counterparts.

L3F Profit Efficiency among the Participants of Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) programme in Kenya Life by Dr Tenzin Yindok (2016)

The goal of this report is to estimate the effect of the programme on profit efficiency of poultry farmers in Kenya. It will also explore whether empowerment, measured as an index based on an attitudinal questionnaire, affects profit efficiency.

Data on poultry farmers in Kakamega and Busia counties in Kenya. The survey consists of three types of poultry households: L3F programme, SHG/support groups and neither L3F participants, nor members of the SHG groups.

L3F has a positive impact on profit and profit efficiency. Empowerment is a significant determinant of profit, with a 1% increase in empowerment leading to 2.3% increase in profit.

L3F can lead to economic improvement, not just the reverse (i.e. higher income leading to empowerment). Care should be taken to foster empowerment at the household and community level as well as the enterprise level.


This paper attempts to illustrate the importance of conceptualising lifelong learning beyond formal education through a lifelong learning index, and how non-formal learning can

This study utilises data collected as part of a programme evaluation study of the L3F programme. Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire, administered

The L3F group has the highest lifelong learning index scores; the L3F group has a significantly higher average empowerment score than the two control groups. L3F membership

The findings of this microstudy indicate that lifelong learning can play a crucial role in the empowerment process. One of the most interesting, and perhaps controversial findings, is that
<table>
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<tr>
<th>L3F</th>
<th>Scaling up Support for Lifelong Learning for Farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa: Reaching the Unreached through Open and Distance Learning in Ghana &amp; Tanzania. Project Progress Report to Global Affairs Canada. By Commonwealth of Learning. (2016)</th>
<th>The report summarises the progress of the Global Affairs Canada funded L3F project in Ghana and Tanzania. The study utilises secondary data from partners, consultant reports and data collected as a part of an impact study to outline the progress towards outcomes of the L3F project in Ghana and Tanzania.</th>
<th>The L3F groups are engaging in learning and borrowing to strengthen their livelihoods. Progress in Tanzania has been more substantial than in Ghana. The limited availability of financial capital has posed challenges.</th>
<th>There is a need to integrate partners from the financial and mobile phone/ICT sectors on a win-win framework in order to strengthen and expand the programme.</th>
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<td>OER4SD</td>
<td>Follow-up Study on the Advocacy, Sensitization and Development of Draft Open Educational Resources Guide for Cameroon’s Ministries of Basic and Secondary</td>
<td>To determine how the OER advocacy and sensitisation activities in Cameroon have impacted the attitudes and behaviours of participants</td>
<td>Survey questionnaire to participants (n=322)</td>
<td>Although the majority of respondents have not evolved in the use of the resources, they have a positive attitude towards it and believe that it</td>
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<td>Education by Dr Michael Nkwenti</td>
<td>could significantly contribute in enhancing learning outcomes.</td>
<td>adopt, use and reuse OER</td>
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<td>Open/Innovative Schooling</td>
<td>Study on Implementation and Outcomes of Elimu Project by Dr Wycliffe Owade (DRAFT)</td>
<td>Coordination with the ministry/school board is essential to ensure the materials are used in classrooms</td>
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<td>The initial aim was to determine the impact of the Elimu project on the learning of its viewers; however, due to challenges with project implementation, this was not possible. Instead, the report reflects on the challenges and lessons learned</td>
<td>Those participating in the content creation had positive feedback about the experience. It appears that the videos are not being used regularly or strategically in the classrooms.</td>
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<td>Teacher Education</td>
<td>Regional Report on ORELTL By Dr Fridah Kanana Erastus</td>
<td>Recommendations: a long term collaboration between stakeholders and teachers, and enhancing instructional support and supervision through collaboration with other actors</td>
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<td>A comparative report of the Open Resources for English Language Teaching (ORELT) Project in three countries; Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The pre-test and post test results were used to measure the impact of the ORELTL resources on the performance of the learners</td>
<td>ORELTL interventions were effective in improving some skills in the teaching and learning of English language but not all skills in the assessed groups. The use of ORELTL increased learner interest and participation in the English language lessons.</td>
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<td>Data was collected through qualitative and quantitative methods: interviews and focus group discussions; pre and post tests for the learners and pre and post training evaluation questionnaires for the teachers. Additional data was collected through Teachers’ Journals,</td>
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<td>Teacher Education</td>
<td>Report on Tracer Study of Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) Graduates Trained on Child Friendly Schools (CFS) by Dr Abdurrahman Umar</td>
<td>This study investigated the use of CFS teaching methodologies by NCE graduates teaching in primary schools and the extent to which the CFS course has enhanced their capacity to use activity based learner centred methods and improved their pupils’ learning outcomes in English and Mathematics</td>
<td>The study used Quasi-experimental research design in which teachers’ exposure to the CFS course when they were in college was viewed as an “intervention.” The design was used retrospectively. The study used the ”Archived” Proxy Pre-test design. The proxy data that were used were those generated from the baseline studies undertaken by the Teacher Development Programme (TDP) in 2015</td>
<td>The programme appears to have had an impact on the teaching approaches and behaviours of the teachers, as well as their perception of impact on students. There is no clear evidence of the impact on learners’ grades at this point.</td>
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<td>TEL</td>
<td>Mid-term Outcome Evaluation of Technology-Enabled Learning Initiative by Prof. Marmar Mukhopadhyay</td>
<td>Critically analyse the progress made in each project with respect to stated outputs and outcomes against the indicators; find answers to the seven M&amp;E questions; recommend suitable strategy, if needed, for</td>
<td>The evaluation was done based on data collected through desk research. Primary tools of data collection were structured, semi structured and open-ended questions through e-mails</td>
<td>All four projects have achieved targets except the completion of C-DELTA Platform and five more skills’ courses in Project 4. TEL Project has exceeded its targets in capacity building of teachers and</td>
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<td>Region</td>
<td>University/Institution</td>
<td>Study Title</td>
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<td>TVSD</td>
<td>Koforidua Technical University</td>
<td>Case Study by Dr Louise Mbasa (2017)</td>
<td>To determine the impact of COL’s interventions on the institution; to measure the costs incurred by COL in terms of financial and technical support to KTU and, the results achieved by the latter</td>
<td>Case Study based on document analysis, analysis of tracer study data, interviews</td>
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<td>TVSD</td>
<td>Mbeya University of Science &amp; Technology</td>
<td>Case Study by Dr Louise Mbasa (2017)</td>
<td>To determine the impact of COL’s interventions on the institution</td>
<td>Case Study based on document analysis, analysis of tracer study data, interviews</td>
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<td>VUSSC</td>
<td>Delivery Mode and Learner Emissions: A Comparative Study</td>
<td>The study sought to determine whether there was a difference</td>
<td>Using an adapted SusTEACH methodology (Caird et al., 2013) to analyse</td>
<td>The average learning-related carbon footprint of the face-to-face</td>
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<td>VUSSC</td>
<td>BOCODOL/BAC Bachelor’s in Business and Entrepreneurship: A Comparative Study – Preliminary Report by Alexis Carr, Stanley Modesto, K. Balasubramanian and John Lesperance</td>
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<td>The study sought to explore differences between ODL and face-to-face learners, in terms of demographics, costs and perceptions of quality. The study compared self-reported data from 26 ODL and 34 conventional students in a similar Bachelor’s in Business programme. A regression analysis was run to ascertain whether mode of delivery was a determinant of learner carbon emissions, when controlling for demographic factors.</td>
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<td>To analyse and compare self-reported data from 26 ODL and 34 conventional students in a similar Bachelor’s in Business programme, collected through questionnaires.</td>
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<td>None of the ODL students’ parents attended university. ODL students rate the quality of materials lower. The opportunity cost of education is lower for the ODL students as almost all work fulltime while studying.</td>
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<td>There are demographic differences in the kinds of students who access ODL vs. the F2F programme. ODL reduces the opportunity cost of learning. Concerns about quality of materials should be investigated further and addressed.</td>
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Botswana – Working Paper by Alexis Carr, Stanley Modesto, K. Balasubramanian and John Lesperance

between the carbon emissions of ODL and face-to-face learners, as well as the main sources of learners’ emissions and compare self-reported data from 26 ODL and 34 conventional students in a similar Bachelor’s in Business programme. A regression analysis was run to ascertain whether mode of delivery was a determinant of learner carbon emissions, when controlling for demographic factors. The group is nearly three times greater than that of the ODL group. Emissions from travel are by far the greatest contributor to this disparity. Mode of delivery is the most significant determinant of carbon emissions even when controlling for key demographic factors. The results can also be strategically leveraged for the promotion and advocacy of ODL.

can decrease emissions by reducing face-to-face contact hours. The results can also be strategically leveraged for the promotion and advocacy of ODL.
Annex 2: Commentary on Programmes

1. Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA)

The CEMCA programme is aimed at enhancing the use of educational media in Asia in a wide range of subject areas and partner institutions. It undertakes the promotion of ICTs in distance learning and offers capacity building, networking, policy advocacy and materials development services. It is distinct from other COL programmes in that it is an organisational centre headquartered in India with in-house staff. It shares the COL policy orientation towards sustainable development and gender equality, and uses an RBM model for its programmes.

1.1. Strengths

CEMCA’s mission to develop the capacity of partners and individuals in the use of OER certainly meets important needs in Asia. Its diverse methods, for instance, e-learning, radio, teleconferencing, OER hosting, and in-person training workshops, reflect the diverse needs of the region. CEMCA acts a centre of expertise and the fact that some of its models are being replicated in several countries indicates that momentum in developing.

CEMCA capacity building efforts allow it to constantly engage with its partners, which in turn, facilitates COL’s advocacy activities. The themes of CEMCA interventions on social inclusion and environmental conservation resonate with the overall vision of COL.

In terms of M&E, there are appropriate ambitions mentioned in the mid-term report. The impact studies underway now indicate significant progress, and no doubt more useful analysis can be learned from them. The goal of evaluating CEMCA’s impact on employment and entrepreneurship is a worthy one because, ultimately, partners will be interested in evidence of real-life demand for their courses. The plans for CEMCA for 2018-21 centre on better understanding how its programmes improve quality and access. The fulfillment of this intention will no doubt reap many benefits for partners in particular and COL/CEMCA’s advocacy in general.

1.2. Challenges

Like many COL programmes, CEMCA faces the issue of weak partners who tend to take up the programmes but then do not follow through. Some of the reasons behind this are not in CEMCA’s control, such as frequent leadership changes or poor ICT infrastructure, but some are, for example, lack of familiarity with OER. It speaks to the need for more strategic analysis of what the constraints and incentives of partners are and how to overcome them. The idea of establishing OER committees and OER cells in institutions may be a good source of information for this analysis. Perhaps more can be made of the point that OER approaches can be very cost effective.

The use of RBM and an outcomes orientation may be new to CEMCA, but it will no doubt produce benefits in the long term. Outcomes such as the number of institutions using blended systems are good to know, but as is being planned, the measurement of CEMCA’s interventions on learning outcomes will provide a more useful metric. Survey studies provide some ideas about impact but surveys do have limitations. The collection of baseline data which would permit comparisons and tracer studies should also be considered.
2. Gender Initiative (GI) and GIRLS Inspire

2.1. Gender Initiative

The GI corporate initiative seeks to increase gender mainstreaming across COL programmes. It builds on a series of programmes at COL dating back over a decade. The initiative was relaunched with the new Six-Year Plan with significantly increased ambitions for capacity building, advocacy, and impact.

2.1.1. Strengths

The GI programme priorities correspond to a widely documented need to improve gender outcomes both in education and in societies generally in the Commonwealth. It aligns with the SDGs and resonates with many donor priorities including Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy. The consideration of the role of boys in gender issues is appropriate when the goal is ultimately societal change.

The GI programme takes an active and explicit approach to change, which will help to avoid the issues of silos and checklists. The treatment of gender issues in some organisations has been hampered by the tendency to treat them as an add-on or a tick-box. The COL programme seeks to improve its internal capacity and that of its partners, efforts that are mutually reinforcing. The successes detailed in the report of partner institutions taking on the mainstreaming of gender are impressive and will no doubt lead to more progress. The role reversal in the curricula is an effective approach as it builds up new normative structures.

The development of case studies, policy briefs, checklists and scorecards has double benefits: it will build the evidence for the importance of gender responsiveness and practically support partners. It reinforces COL’s role as an advocate and thought leader. COL’s many partnerships with organisations such as UN Women are a positive step. The GIRLS Inspire program has many additional connections and networks for the GI to leverage. Plus, the very impressive M&E of GIRLS Inspire is a very rich source of evidence about the impacts of gender-oriented activities.

2.1.2. Challenges:

The development of gender responsive curricula is a noble aim, but it is not easily accomplished. As the example of VUSSC mentioned in the report illustrates, it needs to be very clear what gender responsive courses are and why they are better than regular courses. Like other COL programmes, the GI needs to be able to show to partners why it is worth it, aside from the obvious imperative to address gender gaps. Building the evidence is imperative. The one study cited (the CEMBA programme) provided some survey evidence of a positive perception of the experience but it is hard to know if this is because of the gender aspects or the OER aspects, or both.

COL’s plan to seek support from Gender Ministries is a good idea, and consideration should be given to even further diversification of the resource base. The Scorecard model certainly raises important issues, and ought to provide a sensitising function. Care is needed to make sure it is easy to use and that partners perceive important benefits.
2.2. GIRLS Inspire

2.2.1. Strengths:

This is certainly one of the strongest programmes at COL. The two areas of activity, ending early marriage and economic empowerment, have been recognised as critically important in changing gender norms. The program is operating in diverse settings where the challenges are very great. Yet it is possible to present quite persuasive evidence of impact. It reaches out to support quite vulnerable populations such as young girls and rural women, which is a hallmark of good gender programming.

The M&E systems are very well designed and, in fact, provide a model for other programmes at COL. The systematic collection of baseline and endline data is very useful. Social rates of return are complex to compute and challenging to communicate, but the programme does this very well. It is also providing good evidence of the value of ODL and capacity building, which COL may be able to harvest as part of its general advocacy for these modes of development.

GIRLS Inspire has very strong local community connections and operates an effective series of networks and partnerships. The blog presence of the programme is quite attractive with diverse stories of success.

2.2.2. Challenges:

Unlike other COL programmes, GIRLS Inspire is built on a classic funding relationship with donors like Canada and Australia. While there are advantages to this support such as funding, networks, and profile, there are also transaction costs and the finite term of the programme. The Australian programme is complete and the Canadian one finishes this year. COL programming in this area represents an excellent opportunity to apply its principles of inclusion, interactivity, and empowerment (through knowledge).

GIRLS Inspire has been operated as a separate programme due to its design and funding. There is clearly lots of synergy between it and the GI programme. When a new education specialist arrives, and if another phase of GIRLS Inspire is funded, consideration should be given to how the two programmes fit together. One area of coordination could be in the area of assessing empowerment.

3. Higher Education (HE)

The policy drivers of the HE programme resonate with many COL programmes. There are significant needs for expanded access to tertiary education, as noted in the SDGs and many national development plans. Given current demographics and existing patterns of inequity, an open learning model shows great potential. As well, the prospect of increased quality and reduced costs is no doubt appealing to COL’s partners.

The HE program has undergone a significant reset not only in 2015 but again in 2017. To some extent, it could be argued that HE is just now entering its first phase of a more outcomes-based programme. There have been significant efforts made to refine to the theory of change and lay the groundwork for increasing and assessing impact. Many of the significant activity streams in the HE programme are just getting started and many are only just planned, for example, baseline assessment, the tracer studies, and the quality assurance mechanism (QA). In some respects, a mid-term review may be slightly premature.
3.1.  **Strengths**

The HE program has a solid footing in terms of the gap it is attempting to fill. Many of its current and past activities would be recognised as useful by stakeholders, for instance, drafting ODL institutional policies. The integrated model shows good logic and pragmatism in its phased approach. It starts at the appropriate entry point, which is a baseline assessment of its partners’ institutional needs. The recognition that the programme was still somewhat output based is critical, and bodes well for a shift towards more impact.

The plans for tracer studies and the gender scorecard will really help to demonstrate impact later. The emphasis on relevance (especially employability) and demand will certainly help with the sustainability of the programme. The value-chain or lifecycle of the learner perspective is very useful because it points to the fundamental motivation for learning: what happens for the learner. The HE programme takes a multipronged approach by supporting training, policy development, QA, and materials development, among other activities. Meeting needs across the institutional spectrum from users to decision-makers will help to trigger change. The “planned project approach” using SWOT is very good as it engages stakeholders in strategic ways. This would be in contrast to a model that is presented (in this case ODL for HE) as a magic bullet that ought to work everywhere.

The decision to narrow the focus to fewer partners and be more strategic will help over the long term to build a programme that can be marketed more widely. The fact that there are diverse partners will also help, as lessons learned can be shared across the network. The plan to develop communities of practice should also help. Including M&E in the partnership agreements will be very useful both for COL and its partners in the long run. It signals that M&E are normal and good, and not a threat to be minimised. The piloting idea is quite appropriate and there is an interesting range of contexts for comparison later.

3.2.  **Challenges**

Institutionalising a model like ODL in HE is a daunting task. The traditional institutional culture of universities is not well suited to RBM nor do many of them have the resources and capacity to expand. As the report noted, the development of policies is but a simple first step. The stakeholders within institutions face many constraints now, and additional demands may be met with façade conformity or by outright resistance because no additional funding is being provided for additional duties. The idea of using peers for incentivising change, for example at leadership summits, is good, but it has its limits. New and visionary motivations will need to be coupled with substantial capacity development. This will very likely centre on training and materials development. These activities are already underway and will need to be paired with the other key efforts, such as QA, policy development, promotion programmes and joint projects. The new integrated model covers all this, but it will require an energetic and strategic push on many fronts to succeed.

An important challenge for the HE programme, which has been widely recognised in the report, is the need for better impacts assessments. The institutional difficulties, costs, and data constraints are significant here. Yet, without an investment in this area, it will be difficult to show impact.

The efforts to assess impact that were provided showed these difficulties very well, for example, the COL-RIM Impact evaluation. The institutional settings and experience did not easily translate to a straightforward evaluation of the Handbook. The available reports were not written with an evaluation in mind, nor were the institutional objectives, goals, and impact measures set up to allow an evaluation.
Quite telling was the comment that there may have been impacts even though there was no evidence yet. The recommendation #1 that outputs and impact measures be reviewed and identified was well taken.

Another example of the impact analysis challenge here is the report on the CEMBA/MPA, which in my view has some methodological challenges. To be fair, the data to set up a clear assessment of impact of the programme are probably not available. The Survey of COL - sponsored graduates also raised some methodological questions, both related to the limitations of survey methods and to the lack of a control group or baseline data, as the report acknowledges. The comparability of Commonwealth countries is open to question as opportunities for learners and institutional supports are very different across the various states.

4. Knowledge Management and Technology (KM)

The KM programme at COL comprise a cluster of services some of which are outward facing and some which are internal. KM provides a series of technology programmes and hosting activities including courses (DOER). It also produces APTUS devices, which are used in some contexts with low IT infrastructure. It is not possible for this review to undertake a substantive evaluation of these programmes, given time and information constraints.

4.1. Strengths

The KM programme provides a rich array of services. The DOER platform appears to be useful to students and partners worldwide and is a natural place for actors in the learning domain to look for models and inspirations. The system supports an interactive mode (for example, with video and audio streams) which is typically more effective pedagogically. The reported technical quality of the services is high and the costs per learner are low, especially in view of the alternative private providers. Support for MOOCs is central to COL’s mission to extend access to learning and will help position COL as a centre of expertise.

Collaborating with an institution (IITK) for hosting the MOOCs is an efficient approach, both for cost reduction and shared institutional goals. The MooKIT and the uptake for the agricultural studies are impressive. There clearly has been consideration of the users in the design. There is no question that IT gaps are a major obstacle to OER. The APTUS devices are an innovative solution and for places like the Pacific region, they are no doubt a great benefit.

The technical services to COL itself appear to be first-rate.

4.2. Challenges

Technological solution development tends to lead towards an orientation centred on the technical dimensions, and can at times drift away from the social and cultural dimensions. As mentioned in the mid-term report, more attention is need to communication and advocacy functions. It is important to ask what the relationship is between technology tools and their pedagogical function.

Using exit surveys for MOOCs is a good idea because it can provide insights into the experience of learners. Follow-up studies on the uptake patterns of COL’s course offerings as measured against employment, for example, would likely be interesting. More data gathering in this regard will be helpful.
MOOCs have a fairly high failure rate and it would be useful to understand what adjustment could be made to reduce this. Discussions of KM’s results informally or at conferences might help here. The MooK!T appears to have excellent potential here.

As with any service function, the supply of good quality outputs is fundamentally important, and KM seems to be achieving this. However, the programme would benefit from a more elaborated theory of change that posits how the supply of services will impact outcomes. It would be interesting to know how the various modes of KM compare in generating impact, such as those with video, interactive exercises, or audio-only.

5. Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F)

The L3F programme has had a long history with COL and is spread across a diverse set of contexts. L3F has undergone some significant structural shifts from that of a resource agency to that of a policy advocate. To some extent it could be argued that L3F has become a kind of signature programme for COL, having moved strongly towards a learner-centric, empowerment model. It is clear there has been a thoughtful evolution of L3F over more than a decade.

5.1. Strengths

L3F can be considered a signature programme at COL, having benefited from a significant re-think of its role and strategy and a long active history. Its area of thematic interest, agriculture, is by definition central to the economy of almost all Commonwealth countries. Agriculture extension has a long history of supporting growth and extending inclusion by supporting poor rural people and increasing productivity. The L3F programme promises to continue this tradition by extending access to learning.

The explicit links to the private sector further increases the relevance of the programme. The characterisation of L3F as enterprise-based and demand driven is fair. Other COL programmes would benefit from such concrete linkages to real world demands.

L3F uses a persuasive theoretical base for its programming, emphasising the learner and peers, rather than a top-down pedagogical model. The three pillars of social, human, and financial capital allow a more nuanced and rich understanding of the learner. L3F uses blended learning, which has the advantage of being flexible for the learner and tapping into the power of formal institutions.

The model for the selection of partners and the supports offered to them for reporting progress seem intuitively sensible and based on real-life experience. For instance, providing simplified reporting systems and internal deadlines is obviously helpful.

L3F has made sophisticated efforts to understand and assess the impact of the programmes. There are several interesting, and in some cases peer-reviewed, studies which try to show the impact of L3F. The strategy of generating compelling evidence will no doubt increase L3F’s potential to influence current and future stakeholders. Comparisons between L3F and non-L3F cohorts are very useful here and deepening these efforts will pay dividends. Particularly compelling were the economic and financial outcomes of increased profits and higher loan repayment rates.
5.2. **Challenges**

A model that emphasises partnership with partners who then seek other partners, has several advantages, such as low dependence on COL, and increased reference to real-life demand. But it also has the challenge of having many actors involved, in fairly complex relationships. It will be important to be able to support direct partners on a variety of fronts, ranging from training, promotion, policy development, and M&E. The intention to train L3F partners in strategic policy advocacy is going to be helpful, both to them and to COL because it will serve to refine the concept of L3F “value added.”

As was acknowledged in the report, a holistic model for learning is a difficult paradigm stretch for some more traditional partners. A more basic approach may be needed in these contexts. The empowerment dynamics seem to need a nuanced explanation and might be confusing for partners. More clarity about how L3F results in greater empowerment might help. Is it the way that L3F is done (i.e. through peers, via accessible modes, etc.) or is it the fact that more learning has occurred that results in empowerment?

As mentioned, the impact assessment efforts underway are good and should be continued. A more nuanced exploration of some of the outcome measures may be needed. For instance, the outcome indicator, “additional people with significantly more productive lives led in a sustainable manner” contains several assumptions (for example, what is “sustainable”?) and would be fairly difficult to measure. The same issues arise with the indicator “# of community members that have taken steps to implement capacity improvement as a result of the support from other community members.” To be fair, it is not easy to devise these measures. Perhaps it would be useful to lay out the planned data collection methods, including baselines right at the start of the projects.

6. **Open Innovative Schooling (OIS)**

The OIS program supports the primary goals of COL to extend access to learning and to make use of educational technology. It is focused on five counties currently, which represents a narrowing of the scope of a programme that has a long history at COL.

6.1. **Strengths**

The OIS programme has solid rationale as the problem of out-of-school youth is significant and global. The fact that OIS is building on previous programmes, and is making use of COL’s reputation and networks increases the likelihood of success. There are certainly opportunities to use lessons learned in the design of the programmes. The fact that five countries have been selected for a narrower and more focused effort is good strategically, and in fact sets up a natural experiment for programme comparisons.

The principle of selecting partners based on readiness to take ownership (for example, changing from Malawi to Zambia) speaks to efficiency and pragmatism. The plan to implement e-learning in 15 schools per partner country is ambitious. If it is successful, it will provide sufficient scope to examine impact and, ideally, set up expansion and replication.
6.2. Challenges

The OIS program has ambitions to address a difficult issue: extending access to out of school youth. The reasons that young people are out-of-school are myriad and vary greatly from one context to the next. The issue of out-of-school youth has attracted significant attention from partner country governments and many international development actors. In places like Zambia, for example, there are many programmes underway, for example by UNESCO, the Global Partnership for Education, and donors such as the US, Japan, and the UK. Hence, this is a crowded field requiring careful situational analysis to ensure new programmes fill a niche. To be fair, these are early days for OIS and clearly, efforts are being made to ensure alignment with local realities. It remains a central challenge for OIS to find its leverage point.

On a related note, the mid-term report highlights the challenges for OIS in working with its partners, the Ministries of Education. These organisations face significant constraints including a weak resource base, competing priorities, and bureaucratic inertia. The negotiations have taken time and introduced delays in the programme. There may also be disconnects between senior level agreement that OIS should move forward, and mid-level actors whose participation is crucial. The Ministries look to COL for support and may regard COL as more of a resource agency than an advocate.

Like many COL programmes, OIS faces data and measurement challenges. At the current moment, there is no collection of baseline data and most of the activities can only be classified as outputs. Outcomes will be examined in later phases of the programme, but at this point this remains aspirational. Compounding the issue is the fact that most of the data for M&E will be collected by Ministries of Education, who themselves have capacity deficits. Some indicator definitions will need to be revisited, for example, “the overall quality of teaching and learning has improved at # schools.” It is not clear how this will be measured.

The decision to narrow the scope of the OIS program and the fairly recent hiring of the programme manager means that some delays are to be expected and there may be a need to temper expectations in terms of the Six-Year Plan.

7. Technology-Enabled Learning (TEL)

TEL’s goals of improving learning opportunities are to be accomplished through a diverse set of activities from policy development and training to materials development. Spread across four projects, it actually sets up a natural experiment about the impact of its outputs on its planned outcomes. TEL is a new programme and differs from many at COL in having no explicit programme history. One of its primary interests, ICTs skills development, does touch on other COL programmes, but to a large extent it is stand alone. Efforts have been made by the programme to avoid duplication and overlap. The mid-term reflection report on TEL is helpfully supplemented by an in-depth evaluation. Given the breadth of that evaluation, its insights should be considered to have more weight than the strategic review presented here. Nevertheless, a few observations are provided.

7.1. Strengths

There is certainly evidence that there is a skills gap among teachers in the use of ICTs and TEL can legitimately claim to be filling a need. The pedagogical improvements that appear to come from the
models COL advocates are notable, for example, responsive feedback, analysis of teaching effectiveness, goal-setting, flexible access, and expanded resources. Moreover, the programme seems to be building a cohort of trained teachers, who then can act as advocates for TEL. Using technology (e.g. Flipgrid) to facilitate lessons learned is an effective tool, and can lead to communities of practice.

The effort to encourage partners to take a methodical and strategic approach to implementation is an impressive feature of the programme. Tied to policy development, the partners are encouraged to identify time-bound steps for execution and monitoring. The contribution agreements provide a strong formalisation of the process ahead.

Moreover, the advocacy of COL with partners presents a compelling and multifaceted case for the advantages of TEL, mentioning improvements in access, quality, efficiency and employability.

It is clear that the advocacy efforts of TEL are centred on important outcomes such as employability. For universities, this often represents a paradigm shift so it is useful that discussions are tabled. The ICT skills courses focus on employability skills, which is appropriate. From the meeting reports, the uptake of institutions, and the course enrolment numbers, it is clear that the promotion of TEL is resonating with senior decision-makers, students and teachers alike.

The conceptualisation of increased organisational capacity in the TEL programme is quite comprehensive and it is reasonable that, if its component elements are in place, significant changes in long term outcomes should occur.

### 7.2. Challenges

The baseline and tracer studies that will be helpful to demonstrate the ultimate outcomes of the TEL program are not yet underway as the programme is still in its early stages. Ideally, the collection of data baselines and follow-up mechanisms will be incorporated at the inception of the programmes. The success indicators will be more complex to measure ex poste, for example, via surveys, which have their methodological limitations.

The relationship between output and outcomes needs some unpacking. As many COL staff have acknowledged, it is often insufficient that institutions develop policies or that teachers have undergone training. There is a tendency to use a supply model (e.g., resources are in place, teachers can access training, workshops have been held, etc.) as a proxy for outcomes (e.g. more students passed the exam than before, the socio-economic pattern of access is significantly more equitable, etc.). The actions listed on p. 21 of the evaluator’s report will certainly help to achieve the intended outcomes listed on p. 20, though many fit the “supply” category. There may need to be some additional implementation actions to trigger success, for instance, mentoring, promotion, lessons learned workshops, and incentive programmes.

Some of the success indicators may need some review. For instance, why has a “10% increase in C-DELTA users who state they have increased their use of digital tools” been chosen? There is some potential for bias here. To be fair, for TEL, these are early days, and time will tell whether the positive perceptions of newly trained teachers about their TEL experience continue. As the evaluator noted, self-reported surveys should be replaced by field level sample surveys.
The key question is what happens next. The ICT skills courses which have been developed have not been actually offered yet, which raises questions about their viability. COL may need to do more to help partners overcome the blockages here, although if the issues are funding or facilities, COL may not be able to do much. Many COL programmes including TEL face the constraint of technological gaps among their partners and their members, including devices, access, and broadband. E-readiness can also involve organisational culture and context, which COL strategies may be able to shift, albeit indirectly, through advocacy and policy influence.

Many of the targets for TEL have been met already, for example, the numbers of teachers trained and policies development. It is not clear what this implies. For example, were the targets too low, or was there pent up demand? Or, perhaps there is a conventional norm that everyone should enrol in these courses, but without real changes in skills development? The low completion rates for TELMOOC course (project 3) merit some investigation in this regard. More understanding of specifically how the interactive nature of TEL’s model works would be useful and data should be collected about it.

The analysis and recommendations of the evaluator are appropriately positive and contain several excellent suggestions, especially those on skills market surveys, course piloting, country alignment programming, and advocacy programmes.

8. Teacher Education (TE)

The TE programme has undergone a significant shift in focus from pre-service teacher education to in-service. That process is just underway, while in the meantime legacy programmes are being wound up. Taken together with the fairly recent arrival of the programme leader, it is a bit early to make conclusive statements about strategic directions.

8.1. Strengths

The TE programme is without question seeking to fill important needs for improved teacher training, enhanced professionalism, and pedagogical reform. It builds on COL’s excellent record in this area and fits with COL’s mission as advocate for higher quality learning. The integrated approach appears to be more effective than earlier models.

The pedagogical change model that underpins TE shows a recognition of the difficulties of shifting teacher education to a new paradigm. Traditional systems are still in place and teacher-centric pedagogy persists. The emphasis on mentorship and peer learning will provide teachers with professional development opportunities that are relevant and demand driven. The TE program takes a flexible approach, for example, supporting the customisation and versioning of the tool-kit for teacher development. The TE communities of practice also facilitate user-driven activities.

The policy of the TE programme to find willing partners and pursue projects that show potential, is appropriate. The teacher training enterprise in many contexts is crowded and challenging, hence concentrating on niche programmes will likely increase effectiveness.

Throughout the information provided, there is acknowledgement of the importance of outcomes such as learner achievement, and better transition rates. There are good ambitions for data and evidence, for example, with the team space on the Teacher Futures Moodle site. The baseline needs-assessment
effort in Sierra Leone is another good example of gathering diagnostic data, which will be invaluable later when assessing impact.

8.2. Challenges

Like many other COL programmes, the TE program has undergone a significant re-think and launch. There are several programmes under TE that are in the process of sunsetting. While there are useful lessons to be gained and some important relationships to be retained from these programmes, the winding down of the programmes appears to be a brake on the full-fledged launch of the new integrated programme. As acknowledged in the report, this means some delays, for example, in the development of the new log frame. Further, there will have to be attention to keeping stakeholder confidence. Change is never as easy as it seems.

The TE programme in some contexts is facing a crowded field, for example in countries like Nigeria or South Africa, with many actors and institutions working on the challenges of teacher education. There are several organisations working on improving teaching using distance methods. It will be important to ensure the TE programme has a clearly defined value-added that aligns well with the activities there. The baseline needs-assessments and discussions that are underway should be continued and care taken to ensure complementarity. The interactive dynamics of blended learning and learner centred pedagogy are certainly appealing, but they need to be taken as part of a competition for the attention of partners.

Where will COL’s TE programmes really make the difference?

CoPs are great, but they take promotion and management. There is a need to be sure the contexts for the participants are similar enough that they can see value in exchanging knowledge. The motivational dimensions deserve consideration. Teachers are generally over-worked and underpaid. What will encourage them to participate?

There are identifiable factors which may limit progress, for instance, infrastructure gaps. The INSET Baseline Study and the ORELT report (and other evidence) shows that skills and motivation may not be enough if there are technology deficits like low bandwidth. It is not clear what COL may be able to do about these constraints.

Like many COL programmes, TE faces the challenges of moving from a supply model where outputs are counted (for example, the # of students in schools whose teachers had ODL training), to one where outcomes are measured, (for example, higher pass rates or lower teacher absenteeism). The intermediate outcomes (see p. 34 of the mid-term report) make reference to “more” which is a fairly imprecise measure. As noted in the report, these KPIs will need attention and there is a resolution to refine them further.

9. Technical and Vocational Skills Development (TVSD)

Like many COL programmes, the TVSD programme has a long history and a very broad reach. The mid-term review mentioned that the results under consideration are from 2009. Although there was an effort to consolidate and move to more intensive projects with a view to increasing efficiency, the TVSD program has grown quite large in the past three years. There are several examples of scaling up and expansion among partners, perhaps reflecting the efforts that COL has been making over the past decade. It also may be an example of the inherent value of TVSD (via flexible and blended learning)
being recognised by learning institutions. The diversity of partners and the variety of contexts for COL’s TVSD programme make generalisations debatable, but some broad themes do stand out.

9.1. Strengths

The TVSD programme appears to be achieving good results judging by such outcomes as institutional uptake, capacity development, numbers of learners, and policy development. An effective pattern of partnership with key actors is visible, for instance TVET institutions in Asia and Africa. The policy rationale for TVSD is quite credible. The rights-based approach and focus on access and relevance are no doubt appealing to partners. One of the most notable areas of success is in the area of partner capacity development.

One prominent feature of TVSD is the significant effort that has been made to seek out evidence of impact. Several studies were provided which made reference to tracer studies and stakeholder surveys. More are planned, and there is a candid recognition of both the needs and challenges of valid data collection. The data hub process shows significant potential. The TVSD output monitoring system appears comprehensive and will be useful as the search for evidence of outcomes continues.

In terms of strategic orientation, TVSD is grounded well on both learned expertise and a solid theoretical foundation. The TVSD programme recognises all the key actors in the uptake process. The top-down, bottom-up and middle-out framework for change shows realism about change management. Using national champions, for example, is an effective idea and there are many other notable elements in the strategy. The phased approach to Flexible and Blended TVET is realistic and has sensible sequencing. The concept of formal certification is interesting in the sense that it will likely resonate with institutional stakeholders. It does position COL as more than simply an advocate of new teaching methods, which may be appropriate to COL’s history and competencies.

9.2. Challenges

TVSD to some extent may be suffering from its success. The number of partners and the scale of its ambitions are generating a heavy workload. In addition, it is clear that many of COL’s partners are confronting constraints that COL can do little about, such as poor ICT facilities, funding gaps for training, management changes, and a lack of institutional mandates. There is recognition in the mid-term report about the variable level of readiness among partners. Perhaps consideration can be made to splitting TVSD into two programmes, with one of them focusing on the non-formal learning dimensions.

As noted, the TVSD programme management has a strong strategic approach, but there are places where the jump from outputs to outcomes needs to be examined more closely. For instance, it is not clear how the long term outcome indicator #1 (the number of people with significantly more productive and healthier lives) is actually measured. There were several assertions in the report that there are good outcomes occurring that are just not being measured. This seems intuitively true, hence further, even modest, efforts are needed to better capture this.

Moving towards a FaB model requires a paradigm shift which is at times resisted by an institutional history centred on teacher expertise and the downwards dissemination of knowledge. As the KTU study showed, there is a preference for face-to-face learning that needs to be confronted. The cascade training process may have to be strengthened if it is to overcome these institutional legacies.
The data hub plans and impact evaluations represent a solid foundation, but significantly more efforts will be needed to produce usable evidence of impact by 2021. For example, the MUST study about empowerment only had five women out of 44 respondents, which raises questions about validity. Other studies have methodological challenges. As is acknowledged in the report, building baseline databases is hampered by capacity challenges in partners. There will need to be systems in place that make it easier for partners to track outcomes. Furthermore, there may be a need to promote outcome tracking as a worthwhile endeavour for institutional sustainability.

10. Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)

VUSSC, like many COL programmes, is in a state of change. There have been recent personnel changes and a shift towards an outcome based model. The current programme builds on a long history and it has gained support among decision-makers in the Commonwealth.

10.1. Strengths

The VUSSC programme clearly fills a niche where the small size of some Commonwealth institutions limits their ability to offer some courses. There is obvious efficiency in the provision of these services by COL and an opportunity to concentrate expertise and share knowledge. There can be little doubt that there are gaps in the capacity of VUSSC’s partners to offer OER courses. The training workshops appear to be well attended given the size of the institutions. The workshops offer a balanced mix of skills training and materials development, which is practical and concrete. The value of VUSSC to partners has also been documented in a peer-reviewed paper.

VUSSC’s effort to align NQFs in the partner countries of the TQF will help to further legitimise the programme. It is an important recognition of the vulnerability of OER to the criticism that is not equivalent to regular face-to-face learning. It will help with the portability of qualifications for learners. The delineation of the value of VUSSC’s carbon footprint is an excellent “selling” point and one which other COL programmes would benefit from.

10.2. Challenges

As acknowledged in the report, there are data challenges for VUSSC. The collection of disaggregated and baseline data is needed if there is to be a reasonable evaluation of impact at a later point. There is a trend to collect data on the “supply” (# of MOUs signed, # of training workshops, # of students etc.). The relationship between the VUSSC outcomes and the COL long term outcomes also needs to be revisited. It is difficult to know what it means that 63 people in a target of 1,500 now have significantly more productive and healthy lives. The good news is that plans are underway to significantly bolster the data and tracking for VUSSC.

The uptake of the VUSSC course seems to be significant, but as indicated in Annex 5 of the report, there is a high failure rate (approx. 60%) and a high dropout rate (approx. 20%). This warrants more investigation. There is evidence, though, that online learning and MOOCs in general do have low completion rates. At minimum, it suggests more effort is needed by partners and COL to support learners and to adjust programmes to their needs. A follow-up survey of learners may shed some light on the situation.
COL is providing an important service to its partners especially in the area of developing courses. In a constrained context, the provision of services and resources may be the only way to move things forward, regardless of the fact that partners should be taking the lead. However, there is a key threshold between providing resources for partners and advocating for partners to make changes. VUSSC does encourage collaboration, but there is a challenge in getting partners to follow through. One example of this might be the fact that only one institution so far has registered its VUSSC programmes on the TQF. Clearly, a lot of effort has gone into the TQF so it is disturbing that uptake is not greater.

There may be a deeper challenge underlying VUSSC: that of being caught in a dynamic of service provision to various partners, but having no common agenda among its partners to “glue” them together. There does not appear to be a central model that VUSSC proffers to partners.