

Towards a Commonwealth of Learning: Twenty Years of Progress



Luncheon Meeting for Commonwealth Heads of Mission, Ottawa, ON, October 18, 2007

Transcript

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I must begin by thanking our host His Excellency David Clifford Saviye, High Commissioner of the Republic of Zambia, for giving me this opportunity to talk about my organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), to such a distinguished audience. I recall that I made a presentation last October at DFAIT-chaired by the inimitable Ferry de Kerckhove-at which I outlined our new Three year Plan entitled '*Learning for Development*'. This was endorsed by the 16th Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers in Cape Town last December. As we prepare for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to be held in Kampala next month, I will give you a brief overview of our journey over the last twenty years.

When Heads of Government decided to set up the Commonwealth of Learning at the Vancouver CHOGM held in 1987, they saw this as an imaginative response to stemming the brain drain that was weakening 'the member states' capacities for social and economic development'. COL was set up to strengthen higher education in the developing world by making use of the potential of distance and technology enhanced education. Traditional teaching methods cannot cope with the scale and diversity of learning needs, but rapidly evolving information and communication technologies can help bring quality learning to millions of Commonwealth citizens.

Did COL fulfill this promise? The majority of people in the developing Commonwealth are under the age of 20. By 2020, 40% of the global workforce will be knowledge workers, with a need for tertiary qualifications. Powerful global regulators such as The World Bank, are of the view that for countries to achieve sustainable economic development, the Age Participation Rates (APR's) in Higher Education (HE) must be in the region of 40 to 50 %. With access to HE being less than 10% of the relevant age group in South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa, this key concern is being addressed by most developing countries. As developing countries realise the need for greater participation in Higher Education, there is a vast expansion in distance education institutions. India alone has fourteen open universities and 126 dual mode institutions that teach both on campus and at a distance. As HE expands, it is important to ensure that quality does not become a casualty to quantity. As such COL helped develop context-specific QA guidelines for Sri Lanka and carried out institutional audits for the Universities of Ghana and South Africa. At the request of the University of Delhi, COL commissioned a consultancy to review the

structure of their Directorate of Correspondence Courses. As a result of the recommendations, a School of Open Learning was created which helped to integrate the DE operation into the mainstream of the university. The improved quality will affect the 140,000 students enrolled in this school.

While COL has been consistently active in the HE sector, it has constantly reinvented itself to cater to the needs of its Member States. At the Cyprus CHOGM 1993, 'Heads of Government were of the view that resolving the problems of poverty and food security must remain a strategic priority for the Commonwealth if sustainable development were to be achieved...!' Since more than one billion people in the developing world live on less than one dollar a day, COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme uses technology to empower vulnerable rural people to organise themselves to solve problems of food security and improve their conditions of living.

The L3 farmers model involves four partners. First the farmers form an association and identify their needs such as increasing the yield of milk from their livestock or growing new crops. Then partner institutions such as veterinary and agricultural institutions form a consortium and support the farmers by supplying useful information through ICT kiosks set up by private providers. Banks are encouraged to provide loans to the farmers. COL plays a catalytic role in bringing together all the partners. Valikannu a 60-year old landless woman is a member of an L3 consortium in Tamil Nadu. She is a regular visitor at the village ICT kiosk and sends video-emails to experts to find out more about animal nutrition. Not only does she now own a cow, but has the confidence as part of this association to negotiate with bankers, cattle traders and dairy companies. This programme is now being introduced in Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Kenya Mauritius and Papua New Guinea.

At the Auckland CHOGM in 1995, Heads of government reiterated their commitment to pay special attention to the rights and needs of children. Achieving universal primary education is a key development goal. As more countries provide free primary education, the demand for secondary schooling is increasing dramatically. In Kenya, primary school enrolments have exceeded 80% but of all those who leave primary school less than 20 % will have the opportunity to access secondary education. This is the case in many developing Commonwealth countries. Even if one new secondary school is built each month for the next ten years, the demand for secondary schooling will not be met.

So what are our options? Open schooling was a successful though relatively lesser-known option when home schooling was first introduced in Sweden in 1898. It has grown and developed in different jurisdictions across the globe and has an excellent track record in both the developed and the developing worlds. The appropriate use of technology and a shift in our definition of what a school is, will enable us to provide quality secondary education to millions of out of school youth, girls, HIV/AIDS orphans and children in post-conflict societies for about a third of the costs as is clear from the experience of India which has 2 million children studying in its 11 Open Schools.

Today there are 2 billion teenagers in the developing world. Within this context, open schooling is neither an alternative nor second chance option but is the only option that can help us meet the aspirations of future generations. COL's role is to share best practice across the different regions of the Commonwealth and to foster south-south collaboration. We are supporting the development of open schools in Bangladesh, Nigeria, Pakistan, Trinidad and Tobago and Zambia and helping these countries share both knowledge and expertise.

At the Malta CHOGM held in 2005, 'Heads of Government highlighted the significant contribution of information and communication technologies for development....' The digital divide is a major concern and COL strives to bring the benefits of ICTs to all its partners. The Commonwealth Education Ministers had asked COL to formulate and implement the Virtual University for the Small States initiative. Of the 32 small states in the Commonwealth, 29 are on board and this has resulted in capacity building in the use of technology, and sharing of resources. Over 400 persons have been trained and they in turn are training others within their countries in the use of technologies for course development and delivery. COL has set up a free website for developing open educational resources collaboratively on its wikiEducator.

When COL was first set up, it was the only organisation dedicated exclusively to promoting open and distance learning. Today several international organisations like UNESCO, FAO, World Bank are also in the business. So what gives us our continuing relevance? As a small organisation, we have responded quickly and effectively to the needs of our stakeholders. When the Minister of Education from the Bahamas asked COL to help with the planning and setting up of an educational TV station, the COL Specialist was in the country, within a week to ensure that the Hon Minister's plan proceeded as per schedule. In addition, we have a network of COL Focal Points nominated by Ministers of Education in each Commonwealth country. In consultation with the Focal Points and other country partners, we have developed Action Plans for the current triennium 2006-09. Critical success factors are that we are both a listening organisation and a very responsive one. COL is a small organisation, yet it works in 49 of the 52 Commonwealth countries.

We have aligned our work with the international development agenda. We think of development as the combination of the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All and the Commonwealth values of peace, democracy, equality and good governance. This led us to divide our activities into three sectors: Education; Learning for Livelihoods; and Human Environment. In our activities and initiatives we aim for one or more of four outcomes.

First, we are convinced that successful use of distance and technology-enhanced learning can only be achieved if it is underpinned by sound and robust policy frameworks.

Second, our work in the capacity building of institutions and individuals is geared towards the development of effective ODL systems.

Third, we build models and disseminate the lessons learned so that similar interventions can be undertaken in other jurisdictions.

Finally, we help institutions to develop good self-instructional materials which can then be freely adopted and adapted to serve learners across the Commonwealth.

Before I conclude, I think I need to come back to the question I raised at the beginning: did COL deliver on its promise? In all humility, we claim it did. When COL was founded two decades ago, the founders were clear in their minds that COL would not be yet another educational institution offering its own programmes and courses. Instead, they felt that COL should play a catalytic role, helping the developing Commonwealth nations in putting together the necessary institutional mechanisms and processes to create adequate opportunities for their nationals to pursue higher education programmes of high quality within their own countries using distance education methods and technologies.. We believe we have kept this

promise as ODL has now become an integral component of the education systems across the Commonwealth and is extending educational opportunities for vast numbers that could not, possibly, have been visualised twenty years ago.

These twenty years also witnessed changes of significant magnitude and depth in the approach to, and philosophy of, educational provision across the globe. The objective of education is no longer teaching a few subjects and providing instruction; it now encompasses total development not just of the individual, but of societies and nations. The impact of these changes has significantly influenced the shape and scope of COL's programmes. As I mentioned earlier, COL now looks at its mandate as an agent of change and development, through the instrumentality of learning. Today, our programmes are informed by the acceptance of this reality, as we have moved from higher education to the more inclusive area of learning for development. I am glad to say that this journey reflects the emergence of COL as a learning organisation.

Intergovernmental organisations often tend to be highly bureaucratic establishments that consume most of their resources in maintaining themselves. To its credit, it must be said that COL has always remained a thin and lean organisation; its professional staff strength never went beyond a dozen, with an equal number of support staff. With this skeletal staff, COL has established a reputation and credibility that goes well beyond the limits of its physical resources. COL accomplished this significant strength through the dedicated services of its professional staff supplemented mainly through networking with a large number of organisations, institutions and individuals from around the globe. The commitment, dedication and resourcefulness of the COL staff have sustained this modest organisation and enhanced its utility and effectiveness through the last two decades.

The Education Ministers' Conference and CHOGM itself have acknowledged the contributions made by COL, and have called upon member-states to support its efforts through enhanced contributions to its core funding. I am glad to report that member countries have responded generously to this call leading to the substantial augmentation of its budget. I hope this support will continue not just in terms of enhanced contributions, but equally importantly, through the timely release of contributions. Our work has been possible through the generous support that we have received through the voluntary contributions that your governments make. On behalf of Sir John Daniel our President and all COL colleagues please accept our sincere gratitude.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held in Malta in 2005 followed a new format that included a two-day meeting of Foreign Ministers. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) presented its report to this meeting rather than to the Heads of Government as at previous CHOGMs. As we will be reporting to the Foreign Ministers, I hope you will be able to brief them in advance about our work so that we get their endorsement and support. You will receive a copy of the report that we will distribute at CHOGM. We would also hope that through your good offices we will continue to expect the contributions that we have received in the past. And finally, we will look forward to receiving intellectual and creative guidance from your governments so that we continue to deliver effectively on our Country Action Plans. We are the only Commonwealth intergovernmental body located outside the UK and since Canada is our home we look to you, the High Commissioners based in Ottawa, to remind your authorities of our good work.

Thank you for your attention.