

Towards a Commonwealth of Learning: Twenty Years of Progress



*Address to the Foreign Ministers' Committee,
Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting,
Kampala, Uganda, 21 November 2007*

*The Hon. Burchell Whiteman, O.J., Sir John Daniel, and
Professor Asha Kanwar*

HE The Hon. Burchell Whiteman, O.J. (Acting Chair)

Your Excellencies and Ministers:

It is an honour, as Acting Chair of the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth of Learning, usually known as COL, to say a few words of introduction before I hand over to our President, Sir John Daniel.

I begin by bringing greetings from our Chair, Mr. Lewis Perinbam, who is recovering from surgery.

Our report to CHOGM is before you. We've called it *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning: Twenty Years of Progress*. It shows how COL has contributed to the achievement of the goals set at the ten CHOGMs that have been held since COL was established. Sir John will touch on that work in a minute but I would like to set the stage by describing what COL is and does, since some of you may not be familiar with it.

Heads of Government established the Commonwealth of Learning at the Vancouver CHOGM in 1987. They conceived it in response to the brain drain that was weakening the capacities of Member States for social and economic development. Its role was to strengthen education in the developing Commonwealth by helping countries harness the potential of educational technologies and distance learning.

COL is supported by voluntary contributions from governments and there is a good story to tell on that front. In the previous financial year 38 governments contributed to our budget, which is up from 27 two years ago. I express the warm thanks of the Board to all the governments that support us and most especially to those governments - and there are a good number of them - that have recently increased their contributions.

Thanks to this strong support COL is on track to achieve by 2009 the annual budget of 12 million Canadian dollars that was approved by Commonwealth Education Ministers at their conference in Cape Town last December.

As well as the core contributions from Member States COL raises other funds for its programme. Right now much of this comes from the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. That is an exciting initiative conceived by Ministers of Education that now involves 30 countries. Sir John will tell you more.

COL is a small and effective organization with a total staff of 40: 35 at our Headquarters in Vancouver and five at the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in New Delhi.

Over the years COL has constantly reinvented itself to cater to the needs of Member States. Today our work is aligned with the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All and the Commonwealth values of peace, democracy, equality and good governance.

Before Sir John speaks, in the next 45 seconds, permit me to close by pointing out that a major strength of COL throughout its history is the flexibility and sensitivity which have characterised its work. Ministers, senior officials, agency heads and beneficiaries across islands and continents can identify with individuals from COL whom they see as their partners. COL represents both the style and the substance of sustainable development initiatives and reflects the best of the Commonwealth in relation to dialogue, respect and understanding.

And now over to our president, who leads from the front, Sir John Daniel.

Sir John Daniel (President & CEO)

Thank you, High Commissioner Whiteman.

Your Excellencies and Ministers:

May I first express my warm thanks to the Honourable Burchell Whiteman for stepping in at very short notice as the Acting Chair of the Board of COL in June of this year? Foreign ministers work their High Commissioners hard and we are most grateful to him for adding these duties to his considerable workload in London. The COL Board has representatives from the six governments that are our largest donors: Canada, India, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa and the UK as well as a representative each from the Commonwealth regions of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Burchell Whiteman has represented the Caribbean most ably on our Board for the last six years. May I also introduce COL's Vice-President and Programme Director, Professor Asha Kanwar?

In preparing this report to CHOGM we reviewed the communiqués of the ten CHOGMs that have taken place since the Vancouver CHOGM that created COL in 1987. Each meeting has highlighted a particular concern. Our report tells you briefly what COL is doing about each of these issues. Here I will highlight just three of them: Poverty and Food Security; Secondary Schooling; and Small States.

Poverty and Food Security

In Cyprus in 1993 Heads of Government said that resolving the problems of poverty and food security must remain a priority for the Commonwealth if sustainable development is to be achieved. COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme uses technology to empower vulnerable rural people. We call

it L3 Farmers for short and it involves four partners. First the villagers get together and articulate their aspirations, such as increasing the yield of milk from their cattle. We then help the local veterinary and agricultural institutions, working together, to answer the villagers questions through ICT kiosks set up by private providers. Crucially, the banks then provide loans to the farmers on the promise of better yields.

The system works. The report tells the story of Valikannu, a 60-year old landless woman in Tamil Nadu, India. 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 to negotiate with bankers, cattle traders and dairy companies. L3 Farmers began in India and is now being introduced in Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Kenya, Mauritius and Papua New Guinea.

Open Schooling

In 1995 in Auckland the rights and needs of children were high on the agenda. As countries progress towards the goal of universal primary education, the demand for secondary schooling is exploding. Many countries cannot build secondary schools and train teachers fast enough to meet the demand.

So what are the options? COL is helping countries such as Nigeria, Trinidad & Tobago, Bangladesh and Zambia to take advantage of open schooling. By using appropriate technology, open schooling enables us to provide quality secondary education to millions of out of school youth, girls, HIV/AIDS orphans and children in post-conflict societies. Experience in India, where 2 million children study in 11 open schools shows that the cost is about a third of conventional schooling.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

My final example concerns small states. COL is helping 30 small states to achieve the vision articulated by Ministers of Education in 2000 for a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. As I speak, experts from 20 small states are working together for 3 weeks to produce training programmes on Disaster Management for use across the Commonwealth. As well as strengthening tertiary education, there are impressive spin-offs in raising IT capabilities. 400 people in the small states have been trained in advanced techniques of collaborative online working and they in turn are training others. We are creating strong human, educational and technological links between these small Commonwealth states spread all over the globe.

Tertiary Education

Finally, Malta Communiqué urged COL to give more attention to tertiary education - an increasingly important issue for many countries. We do this through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth but also in other ways. I have personally spent hundreds of hours this year helping the University of Ghana to recover its former eminence. The renewal of African universities is now a priority. Commonwealth agencies like COL, through south-south collaboration, can do much to assist this renewal and we ask Heads of Government to support this endeavour.

I end by repeating the thanks of our Acting Chair for your support. Since the Malta CHOGM we have tried to improve our communication with your Foreign Ministries and we hope you have noticed. It is

very pleasing to see the increasing financial support flowing from Commonwealth countries large and small. This encouragement spurs me and my colleagues at COL to even greater efforts on your behalf.

Thank you

(After this address the Ministers from Mauritius, Maldives and Lesotho paid compliments to COL for its work before the Chairman moved to the next report.)