

The Commonwealth of Learning: the Basics



Meeting of COL's Focal Points in Asia, Penang, 25 September 2011

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*By Sir John Daniel
Commonwealth of Learning*

Introduction

Professor Wong Tat Meng, President of Wawasan Open University. Professor Doctor Morshidi Sirat, COL Focal Points from across Asia, distinguished guests.

It is a pleasure to be here. This is the third of four meetings in which we shall gather COL's Focal Points together by region.

Thank you so much for coming from all parts of Asia. We held a meeting for the Caribbean in March and for Africa in May. This meeting will be followed by a similar event one for the Pacific in New Zealand in November.

We last held a meeting like this, which then included both Asia and the Pacific, in 2008. Here is the group photo. Hands up anyone who was at that meeting too!

These meetings have several purposes. First, COL wants to hear from you about the priorities for your countries in the areas of COL's mission. After reviewing the priorities of all Commonwealth countries we shall be well equipped to design a three-year plan for COL for 2012-15 that answers your needs in an optimal fashion.

Second, in order to set the context, given that some of you are new since we last held this exercise in 2008, we shall remind you of COL's purpose, status, organization and programme. I am starting this process now with a summary of the basics about what COL is; our Vice-President, Asha Kanwar, will follow up with an outline of our programme of work and then the two Education Specialists who have joined us for this Asia meeting, Dr. Balasubramanian Kodhandaraman and Mr. John Lesperance will say more about the programme initiatives in our two sectors of Livelihoods and Health and Formal Education.

The Director of CEMCA, Dr Ramamurthy Sreedher will fill you in on the work of CEMCA, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, which is COL's unit in Asia.

At the end of my remarks I will also update you on a new project, called 'Fostering Governmental Support for Open Educational Resources Internationally'. We shall be interacting with your governments in this project for the next nine months and seek your help in making the contacts necessary.

The third key aim – and we expect quite a few additional benefits as well – is to enable you to exchange with each other about the ambitions and experiences of your countries as they relate to COL's mission.

I've called this presentation *COL: the Basics*.

First, what is COL for?

COL's purpose is to help Commonwealth governments and institutions use various technologies to improve and expand education, training and learning in support of development and in the title of our 2009-2012 plan we summarised that as simply 'Learning for Development'.

Second, what type of organisation is COL?

COL is an intergovernmental organisation of the Commonwealth set up by the Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987 and funded by voluntary contributions from governments that elect to support our work.

You will be aware that the Commonwealth is a free association of 54 independent states united by a common commitment to democracy, the rule of law and the resolution of disputes by peaceful means.

Two-thirds of those countries, including some here in Asia, are small states, and that explains why COL – and the Commonwealth in general – has a special commitment to helping small states.

COL's key activity in this respect is to facilitate the development of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth about which we shall talk later.

The next question is why did the Heads of Government set up an organisation to help their countries use educational technology and distance learning? That's a whole talk in itself, but three key reasons are that technology can give economies of scale, that is to say lower costs; it can reach people everywhere; and it is flexible and cost-effective.

How is COL accountable to the Commonwealth? It has a 12-member Board of Governors; it reports to the Foreign Ministers Committee at the biennial Heads of Government meetings – the next one being in Perth, Australia in November; and it reports to the Ministers of Education at their triennial conferences. These are the most recent ones and the results of the planning which is starting here at this meeting will be presented to their meeting in Mauritius in 2012.

This is the first COL Board since 1989, when the Commonwealth Secretary-General was Sonny Ramphal.

Today's Chair of the COL Board, The Hon. Burchell Whiteman, who is a distinguished Jamaican. He served as Minister of Education there for many years and was Minister of Information and a Senator before a term as Jamaica's High Commissioner in London

This is the Board when it met in Vancouver in June of this year. The representative for Asia is Dr Atta Ur-Rahman, a distinguished Pakistani scientist who served as Minister for Higher Education a few years ago.

The Board is the first part of the answer to the question 'who is COL?'

We are a small organisation with around 40 staff. These are some of the 35 staff members based in Vancouver and there are seven more colleagues at our Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) in New Delhi.

Vancouver is our main office but our colleagues in CEMCA do excellent and innovative work with a special focus on Asia.

But COL's great strength is not just our Board and our staff but our extensive network of partners across the Commonwealth, in which you play a vital role as focal points for your countries.

One of your functions is to remind your governments to make financial contributions to COL and we are very grateful for your work in this regard.

One measure of COL's success is the number of countries that fund it. I stress that Member Governments fund COL on a voluntary basis – which is a good way of keeping an organisation responsive and honest.

Six countries make the largest contributions to COL and have permanent seats on the Board. But what makes us especially proud is that the total number of Commonwealth countries making voluntary contributions to COL has risen from 27 to 44 between the last triennium and this triennium. That must mean that most Commonwealth countries like what we do.

But the real test of success is that as well as governments, our hundreds of partner institutions and the hundreds of thousands of individuals affected by our work also value our impact. Your work as focal points is a vital contribution to increasing COL's reach.

We try to support you and engage governments and partners with a strong programme of stakeholder engagement led by our Vice-President, Asha Kanwar.

This programme of stakeholder engagement centres around you, as the focal points for your countries.

COL aims to be accountable to each country so at the end of each triennium we submit a report to each Commonwealth country saying what we have done in that country.

These are brought together for Education Ministers and Foreign Ministers, at the meetings that I mentioned, in a volume entitled *COL in the Commonwealth*.

Now we are engaged in starting the cycle again. As a result of these focal point meetings we shall develop proposals for action in each country for 2012-2015 and we intend that before we meet the Education Ministers at 17CCEM next year we shall have translated them, with your help, into country action plans that can serve as a basis for our work.

So this planning process is an important part of your role as focal points. We look to you to give us feedback; to see that our plans are aligned with your national priorities; to link with other ministries, since not all COL's work falls within the remit of ministries of education, and to exchange information with each other so that we can identify some regional priorities as well.

This meeting is an important opportunity to play those roles. We invite you to tell us candidly how COL's work is advancing in your countries at the mid-point of this 2009-2012 triennium; to make proposals for the next plan and to network with each other to spread the benefits of COL's work.

Professor Asha Kanwar will remind you of the details of COL's current programme but let me just recall that it is increasing opportunities for learning on two fronts.

In the first, we help countries to expand formal education. That means using distance learning technology in four areas: open schooling, teacher education, higher education, and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

On the second front we help to expand the informal learning that is essential for improving livelihoods on four fronts as well: skills development; learning for farming; healthy communities, and integrating eLearning.

So let me conclude by summarising what you get from COL. First, COL works for you. That is why the Heads of Government set it up. Second, COL has strong expertise in learning technologies at a time when they are more and more important. Third, we believe in south-south cooperation and we walk that talk. Fourth, we are not a donor telling you what to do – we help you to develop your way. But fifth, one of the things we do contribute is models for technology use that have worked elsewhere and may work for you.

In return, we ask you to engage in dialogue with us about your priorities; to track progress on your country action plan; to get involved (for example some of you are deeply involved in the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth; and finally to encourage your governments to make their voluntary contributions to our budget.

So I end by thanking you for your role in increasing the number of voluntary contribution. I look forward to working with you to make COL's 2012-2015 Plan even more relevant to your needs than the previous one.

Transforming Learning through Open Educational Resources

By Sir John Daniel
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning

I would now like to take five minutes to tell you about a very important joint approach that COL and UNESCO will be making to your governments. The subject is Open Educational Resources.

Heads of Government set up the Commonwealth of Learning two decades ago because they believed that information and communications technology (ICTs) could help to equalise the distribution of high quality educational opportunities.

The key aspiration contained in the report was that: *"...any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth"*.

That promise was ahead of its time in 1987 but is now being fulfilled. An important way to expand access to education of better quality at lower cost is through materials that may be freely accessed, reused, modified and shared by anyone.

The term Open Educational Resources was coined for such materials at a meeting on Higher Education in Developing Countries held at UNESCO in 2002. Since then an increasingly vigorous Open Educational Resources (OER) movement has developed in countries all over the world.

Because opening up education, training and learning is at the heart of its mission COL has made a strong commitment to the development, sharing and repurposing of OER. Let me give a few examples.

First, the programme called TESSA, Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, has engaged 700 African academic teacher educators from universities in a dozen countries in authoring and adapting study units for primary teachers. These open educational resources have been adapted to ten country contexts and are available in Arabic, English, French and Kiswahili on the TESSA website.

All TESSA study units contain a series of activities that participating teachers can carry out in their classrooms. In 2010, 400,000 teachers on 19 teacher education programmes benefitted from TESSA resources and lessons with a positive impact on learning of the millions of children in their classrooms.

Second, in order to improve quality and access at senior secondary level COL has worked with teachers in six countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia to create a complete senior secondary curriculum as OER. Since these are Open Educational Resources they can be taken off the COL website freely and adapted for use anywhere in the world.

Third, back in 2000 the ministers of education of the Commonwealth's 32 small states decided that they would work together to implement eLearning in their countries since none of them had the critical mass to go it alone. They called this collaborative network the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

Since then they have worked together to create eLearning materials, as OER, in a range of practical areas like sustainable agriculture, disaster management, fisheries, port management and entrepreneurship. Again, these materials are freely available for anyone, anywhere to take and adapt.

These examples show that OER are already being created and used in most Commonwealth countries.

So far, however, this has been largely a grassroots movement of teachers and institutions which believe that knowledge is the common wealth of humankind and that we should share it widely rather than lock it away under copyright.

UNESCO and COL will be writing to all governments to alert them to the importance of OER for expanding quality education and, where they have not already done so, to adopt policies that encourage

the production and use of OER. The OECD is conducting a similar campaign with its members and we hope to link the two.

Some governments already insist that the data and results from research conducted with public funds should be made openly accessible so that they can be useful to everyone. Similar benefits could be achieved if all educationally useful material prepared with public funds were made available under open licences.

Open licences are not an alternative to or an abandonment of copyright. They are legal tools that make use of existing copyright laws and enable the copyright holder to allow the material to be used in various ways.

There is a range of such open licences of which Creative Commons is the most widespread. The Commonwealth of Learning encourages governments to require that material developed with public funds be made available under the most open licence possible so that it can benefit as many people as possible.

COL and UNESCO are embarking on a year-long project leading to UNESCO's World Conference on Open Educational Resources to be held in Paris on 20-22 June, 2012. We are also linking up to a similar campaign at the OECD.

COL believes that the Open Educational Resources movement has a huge potential to improve education, training and learning all over the Commonwealth and I invite you to alert your authorities to its importance and to review their policies for making educational materials available.