

Pre-CHOGM Foreign Ministers' Meeting



Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 25 November 2009

Address by Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning

Introduction

Madam Chair, Secretary-General, Honourable Ministers and delegates.

I am most grateful to our distinguished Board Chair, the Honourable Burchell Whiteman, for introducing this brief presentation of highlights of the work of the Commonwealth of Learning. We are extremely fortunate to have His Excellency Burchell Whiteman as our Board Chair. COL's focus is learning – he served for many years as Minister of Education in Jamaica. COL is an intergovernmental organisation of the Commonwealth – as High Commissioner in London he is thoroughly familiar with the operation of intergovernmental bodies.

Heads of Government created the Commonwealth of Learning 11 CHOGMs ago when they met in Vancouver in 1987. They established COL in the belief that countries needed help in using information and communications technologies to advance education, training and learning. That is COL's mission.

COL's Plan for 2009-2012

Our slogan, and the title of our plan for 2009-2012, is *Learning for Development*. In one part of our work we help countries expand their formal education systems at all levels in four ways.

First, we assist with the expansion of open schooling to help countries cope with the huge surge of 200 million youngsters looking for secondary education now that Universal Primary Education is being achieved. For example, we helped our hosts, Trinidad & Tobago, to set up an Open School in 2007.

Two days ago the Commonwealth Association of Open Schools was launched at a ceremony in Delhi. This new association expresses the current importance of open schooling for Commonwealth countries.

Second we help with the expansion and improvement of teacher education, a critical function in a world that needs 10 million new teachers over the next decade – the majority of them in the Commonwealth.

Third, we show universities how to improve quality as they expand rapidly and make more use of distance learning and ICTs to meet burgeoning demand. Many countries and institutions ask COL for help to do eLearning.

This related to our fourth thrust, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. The idea was launched by Education Ministers back in 2000; the reality now involves more than 30 small states and is making a significant impact. It now has a pan-Commonwealth management committee, chaired by Samoa, and COL facilitates the work as needed.

COL also promotes more informal learning focused on livelihoods and health. Our Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme is visibly improving rural prosperity in the countries where it operates. This is linked to a wider programme of skills development, again aimed at fostering learning that leads rapidly to better livelihoods.

Finally our programme on healthy communities aims to put the ‘community’ back into community radio and help people use local media for health education and other community priorities.

That, Honourable Ministers, is COL’s overall programme, laid out in the 3-year plan that Education Ministers approved in Kuala Lumpur in June.

COL’s focuses on country priorities

Our overwhelming priority is to assist individual countries. COL prides itself in its resolute country focus. At the Education Ministers conference in June we presented a report, *COL in the Commonwealth 2006-2009*, with individual reports for each of the 53 Member States. In the document at each of your places we have extracted the report for your country and included with it a summary of COL’s activities in your region as well as a note on our Pan-Commonwealth work.

I hope that when you review your country report you will agree that COL has attuned its work carefully to your national priorities for applying technology to learning.

We are now developing country action plans for 2009-2012 for all Member States. Yesterday, for example, at the University of the West Indies, we had a very useful consultation on the priorities for Trinidad & Tobago with over a hundred people.

Priorities from CHOGMs

COL also takes seriously its duty to work on the priority themes that emerge from CHOGMs. I conclude with a few comments on those.

The Malta CHOGM stressed the importance of bridging the digital divide. I give you five examples of how COL is doing that.

First, with the help of institutions across the Commonwealth, we have translated the International Computer Driving Licence into a Commonwealth Computer Navigator’s Certificate that gives people the generic skills to use proprietary or open source software. This course is freely available for any institution to use and teach.

Second, our Learning4Content programme has, at very little cost, enabled thousands of teachers in all Commonwealth countries to learn how to develop eLearning materials on wikis.

Third, we are working with the University of British Columbia to use mobile phones at scale in rural development. A system called LIVES automates voicemail-based learning materials to reach thousands of farmers in their local language or dialect. It has been enthusiastically adopted by the IKSL-Airtel group in India and we shall roll it out more widely in the coming year.

Fourth, COL's unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, is in the final stages of developing a Commonwealth Computing Device for education, Edu-Frame, which will cost only \$50 when mass produced. We shall make the plans freely available to potential manufacturers.

Fifth, in keeping with COL's principle that knowledge should be the common wealth of humankind, we are promoting and facilitating the development of Open Educational Resources: quality content that anyone can use and adapt. For example, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia are working together on Open Educational Resources for the senior secondary curriculum.

Most African Commonwealth countries are involved in the TESSA programme, which takes a similar approach to teacher education and reached half a million African teachers last year.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is also based on the development and sharing of Open Educational Resources.

The Kampala CHOGM received the report *Civil Paths to Peace* and made the cultivation of respect and understanding a priority. The Secretary-General asked COL to use media and technology to get youth involved in advancing this agenda.

As a first step we are getting the open universities of the Commonwealth in the Caribbean, India, Malaysia, Nigeria and South Africa to pool their multi-media material on conflict resolution so as to enrich all their programmes.

Second, our CEMCA unit in Delhi is recording video interviews with Commonwealth figures who have real experience of making civil paths to peace work.

Finally, we intend in the next year to start a mass movement among the youth of the Commonwealth to produce and share YouTube videos showing how they are developing respect and understanding in their communities. Please encourage that initiative in your countries.

Conclusion

Honourable Ministers, I hope these examples assure you that the Commonwealth of Learning focuses its work tightly on your national agendas, taking into account Commonwealth priorities. I end by thanking you for the voluntary financial contributions that you make to COL, for the great work of your country focal points for COL, and for the tremendous support we get from the hundreds of institutions and thousands of individuals in your countries that we count as our partners.

Thank you, Madam Chair.