

Promoting Learning for Sustainable Development



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Chair, Secretary General, Excellencies, it is an honour to present my organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning as it completes 35 years of service to the Commonwealth.

COL was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver for CHOGM 1987. Ever since, we have been in beautiful British Columbia, which makes us the only Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation not in London.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to education and training.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

We organise our work in two sectors, Education and Skills, with Gender as a crosscutting theme.

Our strategy is to harness the potential of existing and new technologies to achieve development outcomes.

The 21st Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers held recently in Nairobi explored the theme of 'Rethinking Education for innovation, growth, sustainability'. As the only Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation dedicated entirely to education and training, let me share examples of how COL is achieving sustainability, growth and innovation.

First, sustainability. COL promotes open and distance learning to provide equitable access to quality education. Open universities remained open as campus institutions were forced to close during the pandemic. The Commonwealth has 33 open universities that provide tertiary education to over 5 million learners each year at about one third the cost of campus education with comparable outcomes.

In addition to the many benefits of distance learning, it also has a low carbon footprint. COL conducted a study in Botswana, which found that the average carbon footprint of the distance learner is nearly three times lower than that of their campus counterpart.

COL supports a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth to strengthen existing tertiary institutions. All 32 small states are members and collaborate on course development and delivery. COL worked with the University of Seychelles to offer MOOCs on the Blue Economy and all resources developed are available to the other members.

As the climate crisis assumes greater urgency, we need to adopt a green learning agenda. This agenda would focus on developing the skills for green jobs for a transition to a low carbon economy; green life skills for a more sustainable future and skills for a green transformation that addresses social justice. We are preparing a report for Ministers of Education with concrete recommendations.

Second, economic growth. Providing access to education is no longer enough – we also need to provide opportunities for livelihoods.

During the pandemic, the COL-COURSERA workforce recovery project offered free skilling and reskilling opportunities from some of the top universities in the world to over 150000 Commonwealth citizens. Even though connectivity was often a challenge, learners used mobile devices or library facilities in what has been a life-changing experience for thousands.

The Girls Inspire initiative has trained over 106,000 women and girls for livelihoods in remote regions in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique, Sri Lanka and Tanzania. This is also now being implemented in Papua New Guinea, Malawi, Solomon Islands and Uganda.

COL's Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme is offered by universities in 11 countries. A recent study conducted at the Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan indicates that graduates of this programme saw an increase of 38% in their monthly income and every \$ invested resulted in \$3.40 direct returns for the learners.

In Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, COL supported women to start agri-enterprises and a recent study concludes that learning leads to empowerment and for every 1% increase in empowerment, there is a 2.3% increase in profits.

Third innovations. Without innovations, there can be no rethinking of education – for COL, innovations are not just about technologies but also about models, methods and processes.

COL developed AptusPi a low-cost offline virtual classroom that provides learners in remote locations with access to digital resources. It's a server that works with a solar charger and a wireless router and costs approximately \$ 150. This has been successfully deployed in 13 countries.

COL's MobiMOOC is an innovation that allows farmers to access lifelong learning using basic mobile phones.

During the pandemic, COL also helped develop virtual labs so that university students could still conduct science experiments in institutions in Kenya and India.

To address the issue of lack of access to ICT, COL recently initiated an ICT augmentation project for small states and LDC's to provide specific equipment, solar panels, connectivity and capacity building. This is being implemented with partner institutions in Antigua & Barbuda, eSwatini, Lesotho and Seychelles.

These, Excellencies, are a few examples of how COL is promoting sustainability, economic growth and innovations. At thirty-five, COL is a source of world class expertise in open distance and technology-based approaches, develops innovative models, quality resources and supports capacity building.

COL is organizing its triennial conference, the tenth Pan Commonwealth Forum in partnership with Athabasca University in Calgary during 14-16 September. I hope you will join us to enrich discussions on the theme of Innovations in Educational Resilience.

With that let me thank you for your kind attention and your valuable contributions, both financial and intellectual.