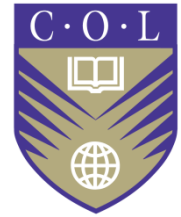


Strategic Outlook, 1995 - 1998



(Presented at the 12th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers held in Islamabad, Pakistan in November, 1994)

Introduction

When the Commonwealth Heads of Government created The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in 1988 in Vancouver, Canada, they pioneered a new kind of international instrument, a bold and imaginative initiative designed to advance the cause of distance learning internationally and to exploit the power of modern information technology as a means of accessing opportunities for quality education and training. The accomplishments of this fledgling multilateral organisation to date have received widespread commendation. This **Strategic Outlook** sets COL's course for the future by providing an overview of the organisation's primary operational objectives and priorities for the period 1995 to 1998, in the context of its mandate, the needs of its client community and anticipated resources. The **Outlook** is a statement of the future strategic orientation of COL and serves as background to support the overall planning process for the organisation and for more general discussion purposes.

By sketching the **What** (Mandate-Mission-Objectives), the **How** (Key Functions-Operational Modalities) and the **Where** (Clients-Regions-Partners) of COL, the document provides a framework for the overall Strategic Plan of the organisation, from which the Work Plan and detailed budgetary/financial projections are to be developed. Further, although the **Outlook** identifies threshold levels for the operation of the organisation and for a broad linkage of resources with its stated priorities, detailed budgetary information will be produced elsewhere in the form of a three-year rolling budget, articulated as part of the detailed COL work plan (to be reviewed and approved at the meeting of the Executive Committee of COL's Board of Governors in May 1995).

Mandate and Mission

The formal mandate of The Commonwealth of Learning derives from the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreed to by Commonwealth governments in September 1988. The purpose and functions of the organisation are stated in the MOU as:

...to create and widen access to opportunities for learning, by promoting cooperation between universities, colleges and other educational institutions throughout the Commonwealth, making use of the potential offered by distance education and by the application of communication technologies to education.

Shortly after its establishment and following extensive consultations, COL issued its first Strategic Plan, which put forward a "framework for the orderly growth" for the organisation covering the period 1990-1993. The initial Strategic Plan cites a number of key functions, drawn from the MOU, and puts forward a number of organisational objectives pertaining to each.

The Environment

The COL charter, the 1988 MOU, reflects a number of realities about the international environment which continue to influence the organisation and the manner in which it carries out its work. At the broadest level, these pertain to the changing nature of the Commonwealth, and to the serious development pressures afflicting many parts of the world, especially the developing South. In a more specific sense, however, they derive from the central role that education, training and learning in all its various forms have begun to play in the process of social, economic and cultural development in all countries. While the drive for "competitiveness" in advanced economies has placed increasing demands on both the formal educational process and on systems for industrial training, the developing world faces a like requirement to equip large numbers of citizens with the basic skills necessary for economic and social advancement.

Events since 1988 have magnified the importance of these observations and furthermore have confirmed the enormous, transformative role which communications and information technologies are playing in the process of learning and in all other facets of society. The accelerating convergence of communications and computer technologies has created enormous potential for devising effective and affordable solutions to the problems of volume, quality and distance in education, provided that the necessary institutions and mechanisms are in place to apply them. These possibilities strongly reinforce the role and relevance of COL as an invaluable instrument with which to respond creatively and comprehensively to the evolving needs of the Commonwealth community.

Strategic Objectives

The experience gained during its first five years has underlined the importance of a small number of activities, noted in the 1988 MOU and profiled in the original Strategic Plan. Based on its success over the first planning period, and the continuing needs and demands of its clients, COL proposes to focus its energies on four *strategic goals or objectives*:

- to promote the utilisation of ***communications and information technologies*** for the purpose of distance learning;
- to facilitate access to affordable, high quality ***learning materials and resources*** in support of formal and informal education;
- to provide access to ***training*** in the adoption and use of distance learning techniques and technologies; and
- to supply ***information and advice*** regarding distance learning systems, programmes and technologies, both to practitioners and developers alike.

The contribution of COL in these particular areas, and their paramountcy in terms of the needs of Commonwealth educators, has been recently confirmed by the Progress Review Committee (PRC), established in 1993 to assess the performance and achievements of COL's first five years of operation and to report to governments with recommendations for COL's further development. The Committee consulted over 250 individuals and conducted a survey of more than 200 Ministries, institutions and

organisations associated with COL across the Commonwealth. The qualitative and quantitative evidence collected by the Committee demonstrated the highest levels of support and appreciation for COL's efforts in **training, learning materials/resources** and **communications technology**. In a separate study conducted for the U.K.'s Overseas Development Administration (Dodds), COL's provision of high quality, affordable **information and advisory services** emerged as another critical requirement for enhancing the development of distance learning.

The above activity areas have proven to be direct means whereby COL can advance the effectiveness of distance learning programmes of educational organisations. In addition, COL is also well placed to support other activities, including distance education **research** and **student support services**. COL's involvement in these areas, however, is less direct since such functions are conducted either by the client institutions themselves (student support) or by third parties (research). While important in their own right, COL's future role will rest mostly in supporting and encouraging intermediaries to undertake these tasks.

The primary strategic goals of COL, as expressed in its mandate, represent **enabling activities** aimed at strengthening the capacities of the Commonwealth educational community to engage in efficient, high quality distance learning. In the process of **capacity-building** through the strategic application of **communications technology, learning resources, information services** and **training**, COL directly contributes toward:

- **institutional support**, aimed at strengthening the physical and human infrastructure of institutions engaged in distance learning;
- **systems development**, providing for effective communications within and among distance education organisations; and
- **collaborative arrangements**, encouraging greater cooperation and coordination among Commonwealth countries and institutions.

The requirement for devising and implementing approaches which are **sustainable** in terms of the objectives, means and commitments of the participating institutions will remain a key part of COL's efforts at capacity-building.

Key Functions

The organisation must carry out a wide range of activities and tasks to meet its primary objectives, as set out above, in a manner relevant to its clientele. The most important of these, including **networking, "model building", brokerage, facilitation** and the **advocacy** of distance education, have figured prominently in COL's current work plans and in the internal and external reviews of its operations to date. They will remain the primary modalities of COL's operations in the future. The uniqueness of COL as an international organisation derives from its ability to combine these activities with *a source of specialised and objective professional expertise* in technology, materials, training and other aspects of distance learning, and the resulting synergy constitutes one of the fundamental, defining attributes of COL as a development agency.

Clientele and Stakeholders

The nature of client needs define the context within which any organisation pursues its mandate, and therefore constitutes the primary factor used to translate its strategic goals and operational modalities into an organisational work plan with specific priorities and targets. Consistent with its mandate, COL must serve a broad cross-section of the educational community, which includes basic and primary education, secondary schooling, as well as the post-secondary sector, making COL one of the few international agencies empowered to operate at all levels of the educational process. Its clientele therefore includes a broad range of agencies and institutions - ministries and other governmental bodies responsible for formal schooling and basic education; universities, colleges and other individual educational institutions at the tertiary level; and professional and other associations in relation to professional continuing and technical education. Apart from affecting the scope of its work, the diverse nature of this client community permits COL to actualise a comprehensive, system-wide perspective on learning.

Regional Presence

As an instrument of Commonwealth cooperation, COL must give special attention to the regional implications of its work internationally. As a matter of priority, it will continue to aim at ensuring an equitable balance in the implementation of its programmes relative to the main Commonwealth regions of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Pacific. Given the diversity of needs between regions, COL is also committed to region-centred planning, based on close consultations with regional stakeholders, including governments, educational institutions and associations, as recommended in the 1994 COL Organisation and Management Review. The appointment of COL regional co-ordinators, consultation with regional advisory bodies, and the development of regional centres for the implementation of key COL regional initiatives, e.g. the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA), will remain the main means of sustaining a strong regional orientation in COL's operational priorities and work planning.

In strategic terms, however, COL should retain the capacity to act on a trans-regional and pan-Commonwealth basis. Although the strategic objectives and key functions of the organisation have relevance in a national and regional environment, they are equally important in an international and extra-regional context. Particularly as information technologies make communications and the diffusion of knowledge more and more practical on a world-wide basis, COL will continue to pursue, individually and with its partners, initiatives which link regions of the Commonwealth (and which link the Commonwealth to non-Commonwealth bodies) in furtherance of its mission. Similarly, COL must address the educational implications of issues of global concern, such as women in development and the environment, which are common to all countries and regions.

Partnerships and Alliances

The COL Progress Review found that 86% of respondents believed that COL was an effective "catalyst for promoting cooperation in distance education." This alone provides convincing evidence of the organisation's capacity for partnership-building and collaboration, and also reinforces the need to continue to work in cooperation with like-minded organisations in pursuit of common goals. Partnerships and

alliances are also a means for maximising the productivity of scarce funding and other resources. The new Strategic Plan and the associated work plans and budgets will reflect the undoubted importance of such cooperative endeavours, involving both voluntary organisations as well as governmental bodies.

Resources

Serving the needs of these sectors of the educational community throughout the Commonwealth places immense pressures on resources, both in financial and in personnel terms. Based on its assessment of COL's mandate, its goals and the nature of its clientele, the PRC recommended threshold levels of financial support for the organisation and suggested an approach to funding which was based on multiple funding sources and types. The Committee recommended that an annual amount of \$5.0 million (Cdn) in "**core funding**" was necessary to enable the organisation to maintain a credible number and quality of professional staff and to undertake minimal programme levels consistent with the mandate and the strategic objectives outlined above. The Committee recommended that further funding of \$5.0 million (Cdn), which was required to ensure a range of services to all areas of the Commonwealth, could take the form of **supplementary funding** devoted to specific programme or geographic areas consistent with COL's general mandate and strategic priorities. COL considers these resource levels and the mix of core and supplementary funding are necessary to ensure the primary goals and objectives of the organisation can be achieved over the period, 1995 to 1998.

While COL, as an inter-governmental agency, depends on Commonwealth governments for its basic "core" funding, to maintain the organisation and to fulfil the responsibilities they entrust to it, it will continue to seek funds from other sources for specific projects. Consequently, COL intends to approach appropriate organisations in both the public and private sectors to underwrite specific activities or to engage in joint ventures. Such "**leverage**" activities will form part of COL's future business plans, but are related to and dependent on securing base funding levels sufficient to ensure the integrity of COL's programme and professional complement.

The Future

In establishing COL, Commonwealth governments fashioned an international agency that empowers citizens through the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and by bringing learning opportunities within the grasp of millions who would otherwise be denied them. They can take pride in having launched an endeavour in which nearly every Commonwealth country has participated, and which is founded on sharing knowledge, expertise and experience, and on encouraging international cooperation rather than dependence. In the years ahead, The Commonwealth of Learning is prepared to carry on these efforts, with the support of governments and partner groups, in a manner which can both advance the cause of learning world-wide and enrich the Commonwealth as a free association of nations.

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- *Report to the Board of Governors of The Commonwealth of Learning on a Review of Organisation and Management, April 1994.*
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