

# *Learning for Development: The Work of the Commonwealth of Learning*

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## **Introduction**

It is a pleasure to be here and to return the visit that Jamil Salmi and Rick Hopper made to COL last fall. It is good to be at the Bank again with friends that I worked with when I was at UNESCO. Thank you for this opportunity to talk to you about the work that the Commonwealth of Learning.

I shall present COL in a general fashion and then my colleague Mohan Menon, Team Leader of our Education Sector, will focus specifically on Teacher Development and Open Schooling, two areas that Jamil and Rick thought might resonate well with some of your concerns. He will try to relate COL's work in these two fields to your own interest and suggest potentially productive areas for collaboration.

I shall start with some background on COL before explaining the thinking behind our Three-Year Plan for 2006-09, called simply *Learning for Development*. This Plan was endorsed by Commonwealth Ministers of Education at their Conference in Cape Town in December. The Plan gives the overall framework of our programme for the Commonwealth as a whole. It is made operational through 49 Country Action Plans which we have finalised since the Ministers' Conference and will present to our Executive Committee in London on Friday.

## **What is COL?**

Let me begin with the basics about COL. The Commonwealth of Learning is a Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation created by the Heads of Government at their meeting in Vancouver in 1987. It is supported by voluntary contributions from Member States.

It has its own Board of Governors with representation from around the Commonwealth, a headquarters office in Vancouver and a unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia. Our

staff total 40 and the professionals are recruited Commonwealth wide and serve on rotation. COL is also supported by an extensive network of collaborators in all regions and we have a focal point in each country.

COL's purpose is to help Commonwealth governments and institutions use a variety of technologies to improve and expand education, training and learning in support of development. We have a special focus on open and distance learning, or ODL, because it has proven its cost-effectiveness in many countries. It gives you economies of scale, country-wide geographical reach, and flexibility.

A special project that we are coordinating on behalf of Ministers is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. The Ministers of Education conceived this idea at their conference in Canada in 2000 and endorsed a proposal three years later when they met in Edinburgh. 27 Small States of the Commonwealth are now engaged in making this a reality.

COL's core budget comes from voluntary contributions from Member States. The six largest donors, with automatic seats on the Board, are Canada, India, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom. In the 2003-06 period we also had contributions from 27 other governments. Our aim is to have all countries contribute something - out of the conviction that COL gives them good value.

We also raise extrabudgetary funds in support of our programme and, in the only exception to the principle that we are not a teaching institution, by helping international organisations staff with their staff development. We have been doing this for some time with the WHO, UNHCR, UNAIDS, the ILO and the Red Cross and we are just starting to do this with you in the World Bank.

It is on report writing and, as with the other organisations; we have worked hard with Diane Ullius here at the Bank to ensure that the course addresses directly the report writing style and culture at the Bank. This means reinforcing the pyramid approach to report writing.

We are proud of the eLearning format of the course. Maybe some of you will take it one of these days and, if so, I hope you find it valuable.

## The Three-Year Plan 2006-09

Let me now outline our new three-year plan. It is called simply *Learning for Development*, because that is our business. Achieving the development goals, not just in education but also in health and hunger, is basically a matter of mass learning. Conventional methods cannot cope with the scale of the learning challenge. COL helps countries use technology to increase the scope and scale of learning.

The plan begins with a section called 'Looking Back' which reports on the tremendous growth of distance learning in higher education, in teacher training, in alternative schooling and in fighting poverty. A good example of this growth is the multiplication of open universities. From ten in 1988 the figure has grown to 23 and today they enrol some 4 million students between them.

The Plan then looks to the future, reflecting the intensive consultations we carried out in preparing it. What were the key messages? This is a young world and creating sustainable livelihoods for billions of

young people is the key development challenge. It is a diverse world and a diverse Commonwealth. However, contemporary technology can help us to complete the unfinished development agenda.

The feedback from the Commonwealth also underlined the development disaster that is HIV/AIDS, the importance of learning for women and the imperative of bridging the digital divide. We also commissioned a formal external evaluation of our work in 2003-06. It told us that we should offer fewer programmes and continue them for longer; we must match government priorities with a programme focus, not a project focus; we must strengthen teamwork whilst taking full advantage of the tremendous skills and experience of our individual staff members; and we must always work in partnership. Our plan tries to do all those things.

We think of development as the combination of the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All and the Commonwealth values of peace, democracy, equality and good governance. This led us to divide our activities into three sectors: Education; Learning for Livelihoods; and Human Environment. In our activities and initiatives we aim for one or more of four outcomes.

First, the longer COL exists, the more we observe that successful use of technology for learning depends on laying down a foundation of policy.

Second, much of COL's work is capacity building to help systems that involve technology-mediated learning to work better.

Third, we try to analyse our areas of work in terms of models. This helps us understand why something works and the ingredients of its success. It also helps in transferring the programme to a different country.

Finally, although we do not develop materials ourselves, we help institutions to produce them. COL then tries to get them used across the Commonwealth.

Those are the outputs and outcomes we aim for in each of our initiatives. To keep it simple we have five initiatives in each of the three programme sectors.

In Education, the area that Professor Menon leads, we offer help in Quality Assurance; Teacher Development; Open or Alternative Schooling; Higher Education; and eLearning for Education Sector development. These are the areas to which governments attached most importance in our consultations with them.

Similarly, in the sector of Learning for Livelihoods we have first, Learning and Skills for Livelihoods, where the aim is to find ways of translating learning as directly as possible into improved livelihoods.

Second, there is our Rural and Peri-Urban Community Development Initiative, which is our successful programme for improving the prosperity of farmers.

Third, National and International Community Development refers particularly to working with the international organisations in the agriculture sector to extend our poverty reduction programme.

## The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is housed in this sector so let me give you a quick update on that. So far we have secured funds for the development of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth from two sources, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation of the USA and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation. The CFTC has allocated £ 1 million over four years as part of its policy of supporting human resource development in the Commonwealth.

A major use of these funds has been to hold planning, organisational and course development meetings as shown on this schedule. Although much of the work of course development will take place online and at a distance, we believed that to get the project going, people needed to meet.

One thing we had to get right is the subjects on which courses and programmes will focus. This list was the result of correspondence with small states' governments back in 2004 and the planning meetings in Singapore in 2005 and 2006. As you can see the VUSSC is focussing on skills and livelihood related courses.

A very important milestone in the development of the Virtual University was the first course development meeting held in Mauritius in August last year. It was quickly nicknamed the 'Boot Camp' because for many participants it was a basic training in working and collaborating online. Participants were introduced to the ICT components of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, open source software, Wikis, and ePortfolios.

They created content on Tourism and Hospitality and on Small Business Management - three times as much material as we expected in the time available. This course development work is continuing as participants contribute online from their offices at home. Participants picked up skills fast and are now providing buddy-training to their colleagues back in their countries. This illustrates what a useful tool the VUSSC will be in bridging the digital divide.

COL got involved with the VUSSC after 14CCEM in Halifax when Ministers asked COL to work up a proposal with them. Since then we have coordinated the initiative; we have put all our considerable expertise in educational technology at the disposal of the participants; we have assisted in building local capacity; and we have obtained funds for the programme.

But you should understand what COL is not. COL is not a degree-awarding body. COL is not the Virtual University. Awards made as a result of VUSSC study will be made by institutions in the countries and we are working with them and the South African Qualifications Authority to facilitate arrangements for credit transfer and recognition of qualifications. This is not COL's project; it is the Ministers' project. Ministries of Education have a crucial role in developing policy to fit national priorities; in liaising with other ministries where courses are of interest to them; in allocate people; and generally in supporting and monitoring the implementation of the programme.

The beneficial impact of the VUSSC will depend very directly on the extent to which Ministers get their people engaged and have them take responsibility for it. The VUSSC must develop in close collaboration

with local institutions, which will have the responsibility for linking into the international teams developing the courses and then adapting and delivering them in appropriate ways in each country.

Finally, to return to the Plan, the final initiative in Learning and Livelihoods is Transnational Programmes. These are courses and materials whose use we facilitate around the Commonwealth. The best example is the Commonwealth Executive MBA and MPA programmes, developed in South Asia but now being adopted in Africa, the Caribbean and the South Pacific.

The final sector, which we shall develop further in the coming years, is Human Environment. The five initiatives are Gender and Development; Health, Welfare and Community Development; Environmental Education; Good Governance and the Educational Use of Mass Media and ICTs.

All this is done with a budget that is so tiny I am almost embarrassed to mention it here at the World Bank. However, governments seem convinced that they get great value from it. Our fundamental strength is that Ministers like us and trust us. From their point of view COL's assets are that we work for them, we have first rate expertise in educational technology, we stress south-south cooperation, we focus on locally driven development and we have some proven models of development that work.

## Models of Learning for Development

In conclusion I would like to mention two of those models. Professor Menon will give examples from his Education Sector so let me pick one initiative from each of the other sectors.

To start with Learning for Livelihoods and our initiative on Rural and Peri-Urban Community Development we are extremely proud of the success of our Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme - L3 Farmers. This takes dead aim at the Poverty MDG. It began in India and is now being transferred to Sri Lanka and Africa.

The model, like most of our models, is simple but effective. We start at the grassroots and get the farmers to define their vision of a better future and the questions it raises. We then get the information providers to work together to answer those questions, using commercial ICT kiosks as an information channel. We get banks and businesses involved by holding out the prospect of a more prosperous village.

In one village in Tamil Nadu, for example, the farmers decided that better dairying was the way to a more prosperous future. Their first question was how to tell a good milk cow from a poor one. The information providers came up with a checklist which some of the village women, who had learned some web programming skills, put into an instructional sequence on the ICT kiosk. This generated other learning needs, such as testing the quality of the milk, because the bank got a dairy company in the local town to guarantee regular purchases of good quality milk. The banks then started loaning money.

Two years on the results are good. Loans of \$200,000 dollars have been made with a repayment rate of more than 100% because some are repaid early. Hundreds more loans are in preparation. The farmers, 60% of whom are women, are more prosperous and more empowered and, best of all, the model is spreading spontaneously from village to village without COL's involvement. We shall launch it in Sri Lanka very soon and discussions are going on in several African countries.

Moving to Human Environment I shall say a word about our work in Health, Welfare and Community Development.

Let me describe another simple model that we call Media Empowerment, which is a contribution to tackling the three Health MDGs. It began in Africa but is now being adopted in Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean. The model is to equip effective local NGOs, usually identified for us by the World Health Organisation, with a complete set of video recording and editing equipment, which costs less than \$20,000, and to train them intensively in its use.

They then shoot and edit videos on health matters, usually HIV, or AIDS stigma, or malaria, or soon diabetes which communicate very effectively because they are made by the people for the people. To reach the audience the NGO uses what we call village cinema: they go a to village at night, hang up a sheet between two trees, and project the video using a projector powered by a generator on the back of a pick-up truck.

In The Gambia they estimate some 60% of the total population have seen these videos and the Government says they have had a substantial impact on reducing HIV transmission and increasing the numbers using insecticide treated bed nets. It's effective and inexpensive. COL refreshes the equipment from time to time but otherwise this is development without donors.

We have some copies of handout which gives contact details for our colleague David Walker, seen here at a school in The Gambia, who has done a brilliant job implementing this model in a dozen Commonwealth countries in all regions.

I hope that gives you a little of the flavour of what COL means by Learning for Development.

Let me now hand over to Professor Menon to talk about two initiatives in his Education Sector which will be of particular interest: Teacher Development and Open Schooling.