

Small, Successful and Not in London: The Commonwealth of Learning



Induction Course for Commonwealth Diplomats

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Greetings and Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here. The Commonwealth of Learning, which everyone calls COL, greatly appreciates the chance to explain itself to you.

We are delighted that the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation put on this annual event. They have asked me to keep it short so I shall speak for just ten minutes and then invite you to discuss some of the issues I shall raise.

I've called this presentation *COL: Small, Successful and Not in London*

The Commonwealth Conversation

You will be aware of the Commonwealth Conversation organized by the Royal Commonwealth Society so let me begin with the two references to COL in its reports.

First, the interim report, *Common What?* has the following statement:

(I quote) **Official Commonwealth Institutions:** *It is quite clear that the Commonwealth needs modernisation and reform at the institutional level. With the exception of the Commonwealth of Learning (a small intergovernmental outfit focused on distance learning based in Vancouver, that received considerable praise from those who knew it), we have heard frustrations about the way that these institutions work at every turn.*(Unquote)

We may want to come back to the wider implications of that statement in discussion, but here I simply want to point out that COL has a good reputation but is not well known, which is why I am pleased to be able to present our work to you.

Then, the very last paragraph of the tenth recommendation of the final report reads:

(I quote again) Finally, reaching more people could involve making the Commonwealth more polycentric. The vast majority of its intergovernmental and most prominent nongovernmental institutions are based in London, the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative in New Delhi being two notable and successful exceptions. This not only adds fuel to the fire of colonial myths which surround the Commonwealth. It perpetuates an insular outlook and a limited sphere of direct influence. (Unquote)

That is also something we might want to return to in discussion because the High Commissions in London, in which you work, have an important role in steering the Commonwealth.

But let me return to COL. Both quotes make three points: COL is small, it is not based in London, and it is successful. Let's take them in turn.

Small

First, we are small. COL has 35 staff in Vancouver and seven at our Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in New Delhi.

42 people cannot represent all 54 Commonwealth countries but we do pretty well. My ten international professional colleagues come from seven countries from India to Seychelles. Our local staff members in Canada reflect the multinational nature of Vancouver and bring links to another ten countries.

Appointments to our Board are made from across the Commonwealth. So we are small but diverse and we punch above our weight.

Based in Vancouver and New Delhi

Second, we are not in London. COL was created at the 1987 CHOGM and Canada then bid successfully to host it. We have been in Vancouver ever since, which gives us several advantages. COL demonstrates daily that the Commonwealth need not be London-centric; we are a window for the Commonwealth to expertise in Canada and North America; and Vancouver and New Delhi are productive places to work partly because, unlike organisations based in London, Paris or New York, we attract only those visitors who really want to do business with us!

Successful

Third, people say we are successful. One measure of success is the number of countries that fund us. I stress that Member Governments fund COL on a voluntary basis – which is a good way of keeping an organisation responsive and honest.

In the last five years the number of Commonwealth countries making voluntary contributions to COL has risen from 27 to 41. That must mean that most Commonwealth countries like what we do. Thankfully those financial contributions have not slackened off during the economic downturn.

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. We invite you, as diplomats based in London, to ask people and institutions about COL and judge for yourselves.

What does COL do?

What does COL actually do? We were created 20 years ago because Heads of Government believed that media and technology, particularly Open and Distance Learning, had an important role in advancing education, training and learning generally. Everything that has happened since indicates that they were correct. Today, millions of people around the Commonwealth are involved in all kinds of technology-mediated learning.

Our mission is *Learning for Development*.

We believe that giving people the chance to learn is the fundamental route to achieving the international development agenda of the Millennium Development Goals; the Campaign for Education for All; and the Commonwealth values of peace, equality, democracy and good governance.

However, the challenge of learning at all levels is so massive that traditional educational methods cannot cope. Technology has helped respond to other development challenges and is now essential for expanding learning.

COL 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: first, to expand secondary schooling because 400 million children between 12 and 17 are not now in school; second to expand and improve teacher education, because 10 million new teachers are needed; third to improve the quality of higher education and, fourth, to help the Commonwealth's 32 Small States provide postsecondary skills for their people. That last is an exciting programme, called the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which was initiated by and is managed by those countries.

On the second front we help to expand the informal learning that is essential for improving livelihoods. That, area, Livelihoods and Health also has four areas: informal approaches to skills development; lifelong learning for better farming; helping communities improve health by using local media; and integrating eLearning wherever appropriate.

I also note the exciting work of our unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia.

We believe this programme subsumes all important development priorities, such as climate change, and I can explain that later.

How does COL work?

That is what we do. How do we do it?

Technology advances relentlessly so innovation is our watchword and scale is our mantra.

We help countries and organisations achieve impact by articulating policies, creating partnerships, refining models for technology use, building capacity and developing learning materials.

I give you just one example. This very day thousands of women in India, who have been equipped with mobile phones by their local cell provider, will each receive several short audio messages giving them tips on how better to rear and feed the goats on which their livelihoods depend. The result is goats that are healthier on every dimension, which means more income for the women and their families.

Our third obsession, after innovation and scale, is country focus. We have an individual action plan for each Commonwealth country. Our Vice-President, Professor Asha Kanwar leads an intensive programme of intensive stakeholder engagement. When we report to them at meetings of Education Ministers and Foreign Ministers, each country gets a separate report detailing what we have done to help that country. This is one reason why countries appear to support us with enthusiasm.

Finally, because my ten minutes is up. COL is highly focussed. We doubt that any of the world's intergovernmental agencies applies results-based management better than COL. But results-based management can easily degenerate into an obsession with process. We are obsessed with outcomes and impacts and we can demonstrate those to you.

Conclusion

That's my short introduction to COL. We are well-known and appreciated by our thousands of stakeholders around the Commonwealth. But COL is both distant from and different from the organisations in London. That is why we are indebted to your High Commissions by taking an interest in our work.