



## FOCUS ON THE PACIFIC

AUSTRALIA | FIJI | KIRIBATI | NAURU | NEW ZEALAND | PAPUA NEW GUINEA  
SAMOA | SOLOMON ISLANDS | TONGA | TUVALU | VANUATU

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is mid-way through a six-year strategy, which requires creating national resilience by working with governments on policy and regulation; building the capacities of institutions to implement open education; and supporting learners directly with open access and skills.

This summary presents highlights from three streams of work in the Pacific region for 2021–24.

### HOW WE WORK

Three members of our Board of Governors hail from this region and bring leadership and expertise in a wide range of areas. Australia: Professor Belinda Tynan; New Zealand: Dr Caroline Seelig (ONZM); Kingdom of Tonga: The Honourable Hu’akavameiliku of Ha’asini, Prime Minister, Minister for Education and Training and Interim Pro Chancellor, Tonga National University. To augment the board connections, COL leverages an extensive network of “Focal Points” to make its relationship with each Pacific member country more systematic and interactive; these are senior officials nominated by Ministries. They keep Ministers briefed about COL’s work, provide guidance on country priorities and serve as a valuable strategic resource. COL hosts regular meetings to update the Focal Points and consult on regional and national priorities. The last COL Focal Points meeting for the Pacific took place in Fiji in March 2023. The meetings are held to gather information on each country’s priorities and to provide information to the member states on what COL has done within the context of its Strategic Plan. Delegates from eight member countries attended (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu).

COL supports a regional centre that coordinates a range of our work and connects us to the work of others - the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD), hosted and managed by the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- **1 - COL supports Pacific Governments’ Strategy**, for instance, via our contribution to the First Conference of Pacific Education Ministers (Auckland, New Zealand, March 2023) on the *Pacific Regional Education Framework and 2030 Agenda*. We have built capacities of over 140 ministry officials in the region on planning and policies for ODL.
- **2 - We have built open learning capacity with Ministry and Institution Faculty teams**, through multiple parallel actions via our *Pacific Partnership for Open, Distance and Flexible Learning* upskilling project. We have trained about 7000 teachers to help them make effective use of ODL and digital learning resources to support learners.
- **3 - Significant delivery of skills to teachers and resources to learners**. For example, 2021-24 saw nearly 7,000 course enrolments by learners from Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The topics varied widely, including training in soft skills and communication, office management, food processing, and organic farm management. A survey conducted among learners in Fiji and Vanuatu indicated that approximately 40 per cent of them either secured new jobs or advanced in their current positions as a result of the training.

# PACIFIC POLICY meets PRACTICE

## PCF10 Conference, 2022

COL's Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning is held triennially and is co-hosted with different partners in different regions of the Commonwealth. The Tenth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF10), the first-ever hybrid Forum, was held in Calgary, Canada, from 14–16 September 2022.

The Honourable Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, Prime Minister of Samoa, delivered the inaugural address in person.

The conference saw nine Pacific countries send 44 key stakeholder delegates. 29 of these delegates were sponsored through additional funds provided by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand and the Open Polytechnic New Zealand.

A special Pacific session in PCF10 convened those key policymakers, educators and practitioners to review the progress of open and distance learning (ODL) in the Pacific, share lessons learned and discuss a way forward. This event was co-chaired by Honourable Fiame Naomi Mata'afa and Professor Asha Kanwar, COL President and CEO.

*"ODL is an important channel for increasing educational opportunities and outcomes, and relevant especially for the Pacific region, given the small and dispersed remote population and limited access to secondary and post-secondary opportunities. Despite the importance of ODL in the region, there's been a limited investment; more investment is needed for education in multiple ways."*  
- Prime Minister of Samoa

The CEO, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Samoa, Ms Peseta Noumea Simi, recommended strategies going forward to ensure uninterrupted access to high-quality education for all, which included: 1) adopting a multi-modal delivery of

education across the region; (2) planning for access to devices and the Internet for students and teachers; (3) providing technical support and training; (4) monitoring staff and student engagement and developing a community of practice. The Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, Fiji, Dr Anjeela Jokhan, explained the importance of teacher training in using Open Educational Resources and building resilience in the educational sector. The Deputy High Commissioner of New Zealand in Canada, Ms Kirsty Pelenur, spoke about the value that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand places in working with national and regional priorities within the context of ODL. She said achieving educational outcomes is not just about supporting ODL. It requires consideration of context and the ability of a programme to adapt and be responsive to progress and outcomes.

A ministerial roundtable session, also held during PCF10 and co-chaired by the Prime Minister of Samoa and COL's President, generated a lively discussion on how governments have addressed educational disruptions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nine education ministers from across the Commonwealth joined in the discussion.

The roundtable session revolved around ODL and building resilience and technological innovation while being inclusive. Other themes included improved access to education through ODL, service schools and how every community is vital to educational growth. Ministers from across the Commonwealth examined the many inherent benefits of ODL in a world where Covid-19 is still a major global health emergency.

## PACIFIC IMPACT (2021–24)

### Flagship Project

COL flagship projects are agreed with Commonwealth governments to add significant extra resources to core programme impacts in specific areas, to bring forward critical outcomes.



The **Partnership for Open and Distance Learning in the Pacific** is a large five-year project (2020–25) directly funded by the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), New Zealand to support enhancing capacity and efficiency of education sectors in the Pacific through greater use of innovative delivery mechanisms and technology.

In its fourth year now, the Pacific Partnership project has made significant progress in several key areas: developing

teachers, providing skills training for youth, building the capacities of ministry officials in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), and improving data resilience in ministries of education. Additionally, the project has involved reviewing policy documents and enhancing disaster recovery plans. This broad scope aligns with the project's holistic approach to meet the diverse educational and training needs of the region, emphasising resilience. A mid-term evaluation carried out by an independent expert group (January–April 2023) found that the project was effective, efficient and was fulfilling its objectives.

<https://pacificpartnership.col.org>

**Much of the work that has taken place in the Pacific over the last three years is connected to the Pacific Partnership project, as noted below.**

### BUILDING NATIONAL RESILIENCE

COL works with Pacific governments to drive the quality open learning agenda through Policy and Strategy development.

COL initiated several high-level panels on Climate Change and Education to support member countries in advancing climate action (through policy, capacity, resources and research). This resulted in the Transforming Education for Climate Action: Report to Commonwealth Ministers of Education, published in August 2022. The Fijian Minister of Education, National Heritage and Arts was a member of this high-level panel.

Since 2020, COL has supported the Flexible Open and Distance Education (FODE) unit in the Department of Education, Papua New Guinea, with a gradual migration from a print-based model to blended and online forms of provision. Online content has been developed for school subjects at Grades 11 and 12 levels, and FODE staff have been trained on how to facilitate the courses. Currently, FODE supports over 80,000 students through its print-based model, but it plans a pilot of its Grade 12 online content in the latter half of 2024 and a soft launch of its online provision for both Grades 11 and 12 from 2025.

COL's President, Vice President and Director of PACFOLD were delegates at the First Conference of Pacific Education Ministers (Auckland, March 2023) and presented on education infrastructure and teacher development, thus contributing to the development of the outcome statement.

In 2023–24, the Ministry of Education, Tonga developed a national ODL policy that will enable the provision of open learning at any level of the education system. COL also supported the development of a National ODL Policy Framework for In-Service Teacher Training in Fiji, in partnership with the Fiji Teachers Registration Authority.

### **Pacific Partnership project**

Over 140 nominated Ministry officials from Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu participated in a series of workshops on policy and planning for ODL. In March 2024, a workshop hosted by USP in Fiji, aimed to enable 29 participants from nine countries (Fiji, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) to understand microcredentials, good practice in implementing microcredentials and the relevance of qualifications frameworks to these new format microcredential courses.

As part of the Pacific Partnership project workstream on Harnessing Technological Advancements for Data Resilience — COL has assisted three countries — Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu — in improving their disaster recovery backup systems/policies in Ministries of Education, with due attention to each country's data sovereignty. For Kiribati and Tuvalu, backup solutions have been suggested as requested. For Vanuatu, COL reviewed the draft ICT Unit Disaster Recovery Plan

and offered recommendations for improvement.

An innovative solution using Cloudlets has been developed and tested in these countries for offsite data storage within national boundaries, with incremental storage to the data cloud. COL has also provided advice to the Ministry of Education, Vanuatu, for the establishment of a Directorate of Distance Education. In April 2024, an in-person regional workshop was organised in partnership with PACFOLD/USP in Fiji. It was meant to build the capacity of senior ICT officials in Ministries of Education to manage data resilience in the event of a natural disaster. A total of six IT officers (two each from Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) participated in the workshop.

From 2020–23, COL provided technical support and capacity building to state officers at the Vocational Education and Training division within the Department of Education, Papua New Guinea. This initiative culminated in the development of a Flexible Open Learning policy aimed at promoting wider access to skill development and training. COL is committed to assisting with the implementation of this policy.

## **STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS**

COL collaborates with partner institutions to build capacity to support quality open education and training.

In Fiji, since August 2021, there has been an ongoing Technology-Enabled Learning (TEL) Implementation project with Fiji National University (FNU) where they have developed and offered 22 blended courses to students with over 1,600 currently enrolled. In June 2022 they also drafted a policy for OER. Two reports on this work with FNU were published and are listed in the recent Pacific readings below.

In April 2022, a regional meeting on “TEL in the Pacific and Its Increasing Importance: towards a regional community of practice to promote and sustain TEL” was organised by COL in partnership with PACFOLD/USP.

Over 600 participants provided input to a survey of ICT access and use intended to better understand local needs. The study found that this was necessary to ensure the effective and appropriate delivery of a learning programme in the Pacific.

A Gender Equality and Women empowerment course was introduced to effect individual and collective transformation for advancing gender equality at the workplace and in the communities that COL's partner organisations serve. Policymakers and staff from various institutions in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands have completed the course. COL has also contributed to building the capacity for monitoring and evaluation, project management and sustainable agriculture.

### **Pacific Partnership project**

COL is building institutional capacity in the Pacific with online courses, webinars, toolkits, curated resources and collections such as an extensive course catalogue. There are targeted events for officials in ministries of education on open, distance and flexible education policies. Teachers have been offered a wide range of online courses to build capacities for delivering online and flexible education to learners in colleges and schools.

Focused activities to build the capacities of TVET educators to offer ODL are taking place, as well.

Since 2022, the ODL Course Catalogue offers training courses for teachers in the Pacific on various aspects of ODL. This catalogue was designed so Ministries and educational institutions can have admin access and share any relevant courses for their own country.

<https://www.odlcatalogue4pacific.org/>

National OER Collection Sites for all nine Commonwealth countries to be used by institutions have been developed with resources for teachers that can be used or adapted for their teaching. These sites were contextualised in collaboration with each country's Ministry of Education to reflect their national curriculum.

Almost 7,000 teachers from the Pacific have been trained to provide effective learner support in ODL contexts. New online resources and courses developed have been used to support and train teachers in providing effective learner support in open distance and flexible learning contexts. Courses for up-skilling teachers include:

- OER for Online Learning: An Introduction
- Digital Skills for OER Sharing
- Communication Skills
- Assessment Skills
- Learner Support
- Quality Assurance for Pacific Countries 1 & 2
- Empowered Digital Teacher for Online Learning

The Pacific TVET Professional Development Toolkit was developed and launched in late 2021 to build the capacity of the TVET sector and deliver improved skills training for youth. The resources can be accessed by anyone but are particularly focused on the needs of TVET teachers, leaders and those supporting TVET education in the industry. COL partner institutions are implementing continuous professional development projects using this Toolkit which include competency-based assessment, designing and developing Open Educational Resources (OER), providing skills training using blended learning approaches, building and strengthening relationships with industries and promoting TVET as a pathway for all learners. <https://pacifictoolkit.col.org/>

A webinar on the TVET Toolkit was held in March 2022 with over 200 practitioners and institutional leaders from the Pacific countries registered, with additional TVET institutions showing interest to become partners.

Next, a community of practice was established in events to deploy our TVET Online Toolkit (October 2023) that brought together 25 key stakeholders from the Pacific region, where TVET practitioners affirmed their commitment to serve as coordinators and champions of the Toolkit in their respective countries. From November 2021, seven TVET education providers in the Pacific have benefited from the resources in the TVET Toolkit and delivered quality training. They include Pacific Polytech (Fiji); Kiribati Teachers College; Department of Education, Papua New Guinea; National University of Samoa (NUS); Montfort Technical Institute (Tonga), Don Bosco Rural Training Centre (Solomon Islands), and Ituani Vocational Centre (Vanuatu). Almost 2,000 users have accessed the Toolkit. One regional coordinator at the USP and seven in-country Toolkit coordinators from Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Kiribati have initiated a Toolkit promotion programme. A new edition of the Toolkit based on user feedback is under design and development with facility to issue country-specific versions.

A one-of-a-kind Semester Zero programme was launched by USP in January 2022 to ensure a smooth transition of learners into university life. Future students can experience what tertiary education is like from the safety and comfort of their homes. This programme was implemented using a COL-hosted Moodle platform. In early 2024, COL also provided the technology to incorporate Generative AI for learner support in the same course that had about 2,600 learners, 70 per cent of whom expressed very high levels of satisfaction with the query-response service. Pilots were implemented at NUS as well as in a regional MOOC on quality assurance in ODL.

Building the capacity of STEM teachers in the use and adaptation of OER is essential to improve the quality of education. In a collaborative effort, COL and PACFOLD have trained over 300 STEM teachers in Fiji and Solomon Islands in using OER. A study report reveals teacher satisfaction with the blended training model adopted, a positive response to the incorporation of subject mentors, and the potential for learning and resource sharing in an OER-focused Community of Practice. It emerged that continued mentorship is necessary for trained teachers in adapting OER to their contexts.

## LEARNER EMPOWERMENT

COL provides learners, targeting especially those from disadvantaged groups, direct access to learning and resources for improved livelihoods, through special-purpose programmes.

COL's CommonwealthWiseWomen engaged eminent women as role models to mentor women at the early stages of their career and girls at the grassroots level in under-served communities to become successful in their field of interest as well as to excel in leadership. COL introduced a ten-episode podcast series where female leaders from across the Commonwealth share their stories on the path they followed to leadership. Both Professor Diane Gibson, Professor of Health and Ageing, University of Canberra, Australia and Ms Elizabeth Kité, Founding CEO of Take The Lead, Tonga and Serial Entrepreneur contributed to this podcast series.

<https://commonwealthoflearning.info/female-leadership-pod>

COL is supporting its partners in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment through skills development for livelihoods and community sensitisation. More than 450 women, girls and young men have built skills to sustain themselves and their families. Solomon Islands National Council for Women trained women and girls on fabric dyeing and floral arrangements while Sisters of St. Joseph, PNG conducted training in tailoring and baking.

The Legislative Drafting Programme, developed with COL support has continued to provide tuition scholarship to learners in the Pacific. Since July 2021, 40 students from Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu have been awarded the Postgraduate Diploma

in Legislative Drafting, offered by partner institution, the University of the South Pacific who is licensed to offer the programme by distance education. Graduates from this programme contribute to good governance in the region.

The Skills for Work Scholarship programme was offered between April 2021 to March 2024 in partnership with Coursera, Udemy and Grow with Google. There were more than 93,000 learners from 25 Commonwealth nations who benefited from the programme, with over 483,000 course enrolments and 130,000 course completions. Between April 2021 and March 2024, over 1,700 learners from the Pacific benefited from the programme. Scholarships were offered through NUS, FODE, the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources Development in Kiribati, and the Ministry of Education and Training, Tonga. In Samoa, approximately 170 benefitted from the scholarship programme, as well as 580 learners in Papua New Guinea, 670 in Samoa and 360 in Tonga.

MFAT, New Zealand is supporting youth employment through training in partnership with NGOs. One of the challenges in the Pacific region is that of high youth unemployment, with many school dropouts. About 3,500 youth, particularly in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu have been trained in leadership and practical skills leading to employability. An independent evaluation of youth training activities in Fiji and Vanuatu revealed very high levels of satisfaction (May 2024). By mid-2025, the goal is to train at least 5,000 youths in the region.

## SELECTED OTHER SPECIAL EVENTS

Vice Chancellors invited from the Pacific to participate in the High-Level Roundtable for Vice Chancellors and Heads of ODL Institutions in July 2022 in Malaysia came from Fiji and Samoa. The two-day meeting was attended by 33 participants from 17 countries.

In August 2022, a regional workshop with NGOs was organised in partnership with PACFOLD in Fiji where 14 representatives from the Pacific joined. NGO representatives learned about the project on Skills and Leadership training for youth, women and persons with disabilities and were invited to submit an action

plan and proposal to COL.

Dr Rajni Chand, Director of the Centre for Flexible Learning, USP, was invited to participate in the 4<sup>th</sup> Pan-Commonwealth Training Programme on Women and Leadership in ODL, held August 2022 in Malaysia. The workshop theme was ‘Women Leaders: Shaping the future for a sustainable world’ with three sub-themes — Leadership, ICTs and Climate Change. The two-and-a-half-day meetings were attended by 26 participants from 16 countries.

## RECENT PACIFIC READINGS

**Gender Profile 2023: Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu**

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/1717>

**Guide to QA of ODFL Provision in the Pacific**

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/5443>

**ICT use and access in the Pacific: Emerging Perspectives**

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/5252>

**Improving the Efficacy of Mentorship with an Open Education Ecosystem**

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/4065>

**Integrating OER in Teaching: A Guide for Teachers in the Pacific** (supported by New Zealand MFAT).

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/4014>

**Mid-term Evaluation: Partnership for ODFL in the Pacific**

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/5410>

**Report of the Special Parallel Session: Strategies and Solutions for ODFL in the Pacific Region**

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/4534>

**Report on Institutional Surveys on Open Educational Resources at Fiji National University**

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/4934>

**Report on the Impact of Blended Learning at the Fiji National University**

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/4749>

**Report on the Regional Focal Points Meeting – Pacific**

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/5289>

**Reversioning OER: A Guide for Teachers in the Pacific** (supported by New Zealand MFAT).

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/4015>

**Supporting Learners Studying through ODFL: A Guide for Parents in the Pacific**

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/5507>

**Transforming Education for Climate Action: Report to Commonwealth Ministers of Education**

<https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/4068>

## ACRONYM GLOSSARY

CCEM – Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers

CHOGM – Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting

COL – Commonwealth of Learning

FODE - Flexible Open and Distance Education, Department of Education, Papua New Guinea

ICT – Information and Communication Technology

MFAT - Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand

ODL – Open and Distance Learning

OER – Open Educational Resources

PACFOLD - Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development

PCF – Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning

SDG – Sustainable Development Goals

TEL – Technology Enabled Learning

TVET – Technical and Vocational Education and Training

USP - University of the South Pacific



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

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