

Welcome Remarks for the Honourable Harjit S. Sajjan



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COL Reception for the Honourable Harjit S. Sajjan, Minister of International Development and Minister responsible for the Pacific Economic Development Agency of Canada Vancouver, Canada

Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Chair and Members, COL Board of Governors Excellencies, Hon Ministers, Colleagues: Good evening.

Let me begin by acknowledging our presence today on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples and pay respect to the First Nations for their enduring guardianship of this territory.

This is a special occasion for us as it is not often that we have the opportunity to welcome such eminent guests from all corners of the Commonwealth. Thank you for joining us today to welcome our esteemed chief guest, the Honourable Harjit Singh Sajjan, Minister of International Development, and Minister responsible for the Pacific Economic Development Agency of Canada. Minister Sajjan needs no introduction with a very distinguished career not only in politics but also in the military, having served in Afghanistan and later assuming charge as Minister of Defence. In his current role, Hon Sajjan is making a unique contribution to empowering women and girls. Minister Sajjan, your presence today further affirms Canada's continued confidence in the Commonwealth of Learning and you are most welcome.

Hon Minister, we are very grateful to the Government of Canada for hosting COL in beautiful British Columbia. COL was established in 1987 to use distance learning and technologies for human resource development in Member States.

Today COL is recognised as a thought leader in learning for sustainable development and is making a difference, as countries embark on the road to recovery.

How do we achieve our impact? Let me share five paradigm shifts that COL leads.

The first shift: if the child cannot go to school, the school comes to the child.

In the Commonwealth, 16 million of our youth are out of secondary school. COL promotes open schools that provide flexible and cost-effective learning opportunities for secondary education. In many countries girls prefer open schools — of the 80,000 learners at the Namibian College of Open Learning, 65% are female.

The second shift: technology enabled learning can break open the ivory towers of tertiary education.

An example of this is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, the idea for which was mooted by our Chair, HE Danny Faure at the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers held in Halifax when he was education minister. VUSSC has grown into a robust network, dedicated to expanding access to tertiary education in the 33 small states.

The third shift: the digital divide can be transformed into a digital dividend.

Not everyone in the Commonwealth has computers and connectivity. COL developed Aptus—a low-cost offline virtual classroom. Aptus was deployed in a mountain school in Pakistan and resulted in better motivation of teachers and improved learning outcomes for students who now had access to multi-media resources on different topics.

The fourth shift: literacy is not always a precondition for learning.

The Commonwealth is home to 400 million illiterate adults. In India, illiterate women entrepreneurs established a farm producers' company with COL support where they learnt corporate finance through their basic mobile phones. Thousands of women in 11 countries have been lifted out of poverty through COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers initiative.

The fifth shift: the social capital of the mother is the most important determinant in bringing girls to school.

With support from the government of Canada, COL provided schooling and skilling for girls and women in five countries. Community engagement was one of the main strategies. Empowered mothers and sensitised communities can be the most powerful stakeholders for ensuring that each girl in the Commonwealth is supported to complete 12 years of education.

Hon Minister, Canada is one of the best countries to be a girl. We are grateful to the government of Canada for promoting women's empowerment not just here but also in countries where girls grow old before their years. We share this priority and by focusing on leading paradigm shifts, COL can become an effective instrument for Canada to reach the last person in the queue.