

# Report to the Commonwealth Secretariat Board of Governors 2018



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It is an honour to present the Commonwealth of Learning on its thirtieth birthday. We have submitted a report of COL's work done during the financial year 2017-18 so I will not focus on that. Instead let me reflect on some lasting contributions that COL has made during the past three decades. Commonwealth Heads of Government established COL to:

‘create and widen access to opportunities for learning...making use of the potential offered by distance education and technologies .... to strengthen member countries’ capacities to develop the human resources required for their economic and social development....’ (MOU, 1988, amended 1995, 2014)

COL started out with the mandate to strengthen higher education using open and distance learning. With the adoption of the MDGs in 2000 and the SDGs in 2015, COL understood the need to align its work to the global development agenda. There has been a clear progression from formal education to the non-formal sector which covers the entire spectrum of lifelong learning. The theme of our current strategic plan ‘learning for sustainable development’ focuses on how education and learning adds value to the development process. This approach encouraged COL to make a transition from outputs to outcomes and impact. COL has evolved to remain relevant to the needs of Member States and has established the reputation of being an effective and innovative organisation that is responsive, results-oriented and accountable.

Former Secretary-General Sridath Ramphal refers to COL as ‘a jewel in the crown of the Commonwealth’ in his book *Glimpses of a Global Life*. This is particularly significant since COL was created under his watch.

We have a young Commonwealth with 60% of the population under the age of thirty. In order to equip these young people for learning and livelihoods, COL promotes alternative and innovative approaches to change existing paradigms.

Over the years, the six key paradigm shifts that COL has led are:

The first shift: technology enabled learning can break open the ivory towers of tertiary education. Open and distance learning can reach the unreached, cost one third as compared to campus education, without compromising quality. There has been a phenomenal growth in the number of institutions offering distance education in the developing Commonwealth, with 27 open universities alone providing access to 4.4 million learners in 2016.

The second shift: if the child cannot go to school, the school can come to the child. Open schools provide flexible learning opportunities for secondary education. The Namibian College of Open Learning costs one fifth of what it costs to put a student through a government secondary school and attracts 65% girls because of flexibility and low costs. It is for this reason that 27 Commonwealth countries have established open schools.

The third shift: Open Educational Resources or OER are the answer to closed and costly textbooks. OER based textbooks reduce costs while at the same time enhancing quality. In Antigua & Barbuda a student saved ECD 750 per year from buying textbooks and learning outcomes improved by 5.5% through the use OER. COL resources are OER and have been translated into Arabic, Chinese and French, among others.

The fourth 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 that provides learners in remote locations with access to digital resources. Its deployment in Pakistan, Samoa and Tonga, resulted in better motivation of teachers and improved learning outcomes for students. Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs have been tailored to suit the needs of developing countries and thousands of learners have been reached through basic mobile phones.

The fifth shift: literacy is not a precondition for learning but learning can lead to literacy. In India, illiterate women entrepreneurs at the bottom of the pyramid established a farm producers company with COL support. The women learnt corporate finance through their basic mobile phones. In the past two years alone, 137,000 women in 11 countries have been lifted out of poverty and every dollar invested has resulted in assets worth nine dollars.

The sixth shift: the social capital of the mother is the most important determinant in bringing girls to school. In order to skill 35,000 girls, over 200,000 family and community members had to be sensitised. Empowered mothers and sensitised communities can be the most powerful stakeholders for ensuring that each girl completes 12 years of school, a commitment made by Heads at CHOGM 2018.

Excellencies, these six shifts help shape our common future. COL will continue to remain responsive and relevant to your needs. We warmly welcome Fiji and The Gambia as our newest members. Thank you for your contributions, both financial and intellectual, and for your kind attention.