The education imperative

What is being done to place knowledge and learning, the keys to economic and social development, in the hands of those who need it most?

In a concerted drive to educate our planet, international development targets such as the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) [www.developmentgoals.org] and Education for All (EFA) [www.unesco.org/education/efa] include this clear imperative: **educate more people, more efficiently.** Conventional education methods, particularly in the developing world, are hard-pressed to meet the learning and training needs of millions of children, women and men. Open and distance learning (ODL) — inherently learner-centred and cost-effective, with considerable collaborative potential — is a viable and attractive education option.

One of four brochures that outline COL's programmes

SYSTEMS	POLICY	APPLICATIONS	KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Some ODL POLICY initiatives: 2003-2006

SCHOOLNETS/E-SCHOOLS

Supporting expansion of schoolnets in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically with SchoolNet Africa [www.schoolnetafrica.net] and in Trinidad & Tobago; supporting the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD; www.nepad.org) e-schools programme, a collaboration between public, private and ICT sectors to establish a pan-African network of ICT-equipped, satellite-linked schools. Newly published: *Emerging Trends in the Development of School Networking Initiatives* (Perspectives on Distance Education series).

ADVOCACY/FORUMS/INSTITUTES

Activities include open schooling policy development forums, roundtables and meetings in South and West Africa, South Asia and the Caribbean; a teacher-training forum for Pacific Island states; an Open Schooling Institute for African Educators, in collaboration with the National Institute of Open Schooling in India; and a series of institutes for sub-Saharan African university administrators, in collaboration with the University of Abertay Dundee, Scotland and the Association of Commonwealth Universities. All are resulting in better informed policy makers who are leading ODL advocacy and initiatives at their institutions.

QUALITY ASSURANCE/POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Initiatives include developing a pan-Commonwealth QA framework for dual mode education delivery, in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat, UNESCO and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat; developing QA guidelines for regulating cross border education, including researching and publishing a case studies report on transnational education in collaboration with UNESCO and the University of Surrey, U.K.; working with Samoa Polytechnic to expand its online ODL policy development course; and helping governments — such as Kenya, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka — to develop concrete national ODL policies.

TVET/LITERACY AND LIVELIHOOD

Includes initiatives in the Pacific that are exploring ODL support for basic livelihood skills education and technical/vocational education and training, in partnership with Pacific Heads of Polytechnic Institutes and the Pacific Association of Technical Vocational Educators and Teachers (PATVET). In Africa and Asia, supporting the formation of regional agricultural consortia, and research into ODL use for agricultural extension services.

AFRICAN MINISTERS' CONFERENCE

An African Ministers' Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education, held in early 2004 in partnership with the South African Department of Education and UNESCO, which made recommendations that will enable African countries to make maximum use of ODL and incorporate it into their education frameworks. COL is working with the Department and UNESCO in taking forward these recommendations.

contacts

OPEN & DISTANCE LEARNING Policy

COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING
OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING FOR DEVELOPMENT

Open and distance learning and the Commonwealth of Learning

What is ODL, how can it be used, and what specific options exist?

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) helps countries and organisations deal with these fundamental issues, and to realise ODL's long term, sustainable potential.

COL is the world's only intergovernmental organisation dedicated solely to ODL advancement. It was formed by the Commonwealth – a voluntary association of countries committed to international consultation, co-operation and development – to help its members achieve their education goals.

A provider of ODL development expertise and knowledge, COL fosters the ongoing, shared growth of quality ODL resources and technologies in the Commonwealth and elsewhere, particularly among developing countries. Based in Vancouver, Canada and effectively operational since 1989, COL's core multinational team of education specialists and consultants collaborate on international, regional and local development initiatives with governments, development and professional organisations, education providers, and industry. COL also provides fee-for-service consulting, knowledge management services and resourcing solutions.

In 2002, a COL-commissioned independent evaluation panel noted that "COL has touched nearly all of the nations of the Commonwealth and has had a positive impact on the lives of many thousands of people."

Financially supported by Commonwealth Governments on a voluntary, renewable basis, COL's major contributors have included Australia, Britain, British Columbia, Brunei, Canada, India, New Zealand and Nigeria.

COL directs resources into three key ODL areas – policy, systems and applications – as well as the rapidly developing knowledge management and information and communications technology (ICT) fields.

www.col.org/about
www.col.org/programmes/reporting/eval02.htm
www.thecommonwealth.org

ODL POLICY *for* Best Practice

What are the practical implications of good ODL policy?

A conducive policy environment directly influences an education initiative's success and can help countries regulate educational quality within their jurisdictions. Thoughtfully designed ODL-specific policies can be integrated into existing education and development policy, to help increase access to ODL while regulating cross border education; develop skills training programmes and quality assurance (QA) guidelines; provide a realistic budgetary framework and incentive to adopt cost effective teaching and learning options; and direct the expansion of education-related infrastructure, such as information and communications technologies (ICTs).

COL's pan-Commonwealth ODL Policy programme works to raise the profile of ODL and ICT-friendly policies with Ministries of Education and regional organisations, as invaluable toward achieving in-country education targets and international development goals. COL advocates ODL as a quality, viable alternative and supplement to conventional education, and provides expertise for policy research, development and implementation. As effective policy revision is often a measured process, COL follows a long-term policy development timeline.

Developing ODL POLICY

COL's policy development initiatives focus on basic and secondary education; post-secondary education; technical/vocational education and training (TVET), including agricultural extension and education; and advocacy at policy-making levels. To effectively show policy makers how technology in general, and ODL in particular, can help achieve education and development goals, COL assesses the existing policy environment of receptive organisations before proceeding with advocacy and helping to implement concrete policy planning and training.

Tailored to regional needs, advocacy initiatives emphasise how ODL and ICTs contribute toward *Education for All* goals, including literacy and livelihoods; implementing dual-mode education; knowledge economy participation; and modernising teaching and learning.

Basic and secondary education and TVET policy initiatives include establishing more strategic, cost-effective electronic education networks or "schoolnets," conducting EFA forums and training sessions, open schooling roundtable discussions, and policy institutes. Post-secondary education policy initiatives focus on establishing frameworks for QA, qualifications and certification at national and institutional levels, including in-country QA guidelines for regulating internationally-sourced education providers and services.

COL's pan-Commonwealth ODL policy advocacy outreach includes roundtables, institutes and forums for policy makers, administrators and trainers, as well as policy-related research and case studies.

See overleaf for more about COL's ODL policy initiatives.

Building capacity responsively

COL is committed to building the reach and influence of its programming and focuses its work through an action-oriented Three-year Plan, revised triennially in consultation with Commonwealth governments, funding and development organisations and education institutions.

The *Three-year Plan 2003-2006: Building Capacity in Open and Distance Learning* goes further than any previous framework to define how COL focuses and manages its human, knowledge and technology resources. The Plan's pro-active Results Based Management (RBM) approach identifies three main programmes – ODL systems development, policy and applications – categorised into sub-programmes of more specific development goals, methods and outcomes.

www.col.org/programmes/reporting/3year_plan.htm

Better business, as usual

With the Results Based Management approach, COL responds to development needs and issues more cohesively. It can more efficiently evaluate proposed and ongoing programmes, and can more effectively harmonise its work with international development goals. COL's knowledge management systems, including databases, information-sharing and communications efforts, are increasingly co-ordinated with specific initiatives — enabling a more targeted response to building programme and project awareness, providing information and promoting activities.