

Small, Successful and Not in London: COL



*Induction Course for Commonwealth Diplomats,
Farnham Castle, 8 September 2011*

*Small, Successful and Not in London: The
Commonwealth of Learning and Transforming
Learning through Open Educational Resources*

*By Sir John Daniel
Commonwealth of Learning*

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 Foundation and the Commonwealth Foundation put on this annual event. They have asked me to keep it short so I shall speak for just fifteen minutes. I shall first describe the Commonwealth of Learning and then talk about an important initiative on which we are engaging with your governments, called Open Educational Resources. We can then discuss all the issues I shall raise.

First then, what is COL? My title today is *COL: Small, Successful and Not in London*. That summarises some of COL's key features.

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 six years the number of Commonwealth countries making voluntary contributions to COL has risen from 27 to 44. That must mean that most Commonwealth countries like what we do.

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, which is playing a key role in the expansion of community radio in Asia and has helped set up hundreds of stations in India alone.

We believe this programme subsumes all important development priorities

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 helping people develop 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 proven 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, whom some of you have met, leads an intensive programme of 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. We keep your High Commissions in Ottawa informed about our work, but you London-based diplomats are the people really mandated to watch the Commonwealth. Please include COL in your brief.

Thank you

Transforming Learning through Open Educational Resources

I would now like to take five minutes to tell you about a very important joint approach that COL and UNESCO will be making to your governments. The subject is Open Educational Resources.

Heads of Government set up the Commonwealth of Learning two decades ago because they believed that information and communications technology (ICTs) could help to equalise the distribution of high quality educational opportunities.

The key aspiration contained in the report was that: *"...any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth"*.

That promise was ahead of its time in 1987 but is now being fulfilled. An important way to expand access to education of better quality at lower cost is through materials that may be freely accessed, reused, modified and shared by anyone.

The term Open Educational Resources was coined for such materials at a meeting on Higher Education in Developing Countries held at UNESCO in 2002. Since then an increasingly vigorous Open Educational Resources (OER) movement has developed in countries all over the world.

Because opening up education, training and learning is at the heart of its mission COL has made a strong commitment to the development, sharing and repurposing of OER. Let me give a few examples.

First, the programme called TESSA, Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, has engaged 700 African academic teacher educators from universities in a dozen countries in authoring and adapting study units for primary teachers. These open educational resources have been adapted to ten country contexts and are available in Arabic, English, French and Kiswahili on the TESSA website.

All TESSA study units contain a series of activities that participating teachers can carry out in their classrooms. In 2010, 400,000 teachers on 19 teacher education programmes benefitted from TESSA resources and lessons with a positive impact on learning of the millions of children in their classrooms.

Second, in order to improve quality and access at senior secondary level COL has worked with teachers in six countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia to create a

complete senior secondary curriculum as OER. Since these are Open Educational Resources they can be taken off the COL website freely and adapted for use anywhere in the world.

Third, back in 2000 the ministers of education of the Commonwealth's 32 small states decided that they would work together to implement eLearning in their countries since none of them had the critical mass to go it alone. They called this collaborative network the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

Since then they have worked together to create eLearning materials, as OER, in a range of practical areas like sustainable agriculture, disaster management, fisheries, port management and entrepreneurship. Again, these materials are freely available for anyone, anywhere to take and adapt.

These examples show that OER are already being created and used in most Commonwealth countries.

So far, however, this has been largely a grassroots movement of teachers and institutions which believe that knowledge is the common wealth of humankind and that we should share it widely rather than lock it away under copyright.

UNESCO and COL will be writing to all governments to alert them to the importance of OER for expanding quality education and, where they have not already done so, to adopt policies that encourage the production and use of OER. The OECD is conducting a similar campaign with its members and we hope to link the two.

Some governments already insist that the data and results from research conducted with public funds should be made openly accessible so that they can be useful to everyone. Similar benefits could be achieved if all educationally useful material prepared with public funds were made available under open licences.

Open licences are not an alternative to or an abandonment of copyright. They are legal tools that make use of existing copyright laws and enable the copyright holder to allow the material to be used in various ways.

There is a range of such open licences of which Creative Commons is the most widespread. The Commonwealth of Learning encourages governments to require that material developed with public funds be made available under the most open licence possible so that it can benefit as many people as possible.

With the support of The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation COL and UNESCO are embarking on a year-long project leading to UNESCO's World Conference on Open Educational Resources to be held in Paris on 20-22 June, 2012. We are also linking up to a similar campaign at the OECD.

COL believes that the Open Educational Resources movement has a huge potential to improve education, training and learning all over the Commonwealth and I invite you to alert your authorities to its importance and to review their policies for making educational materials available.